ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

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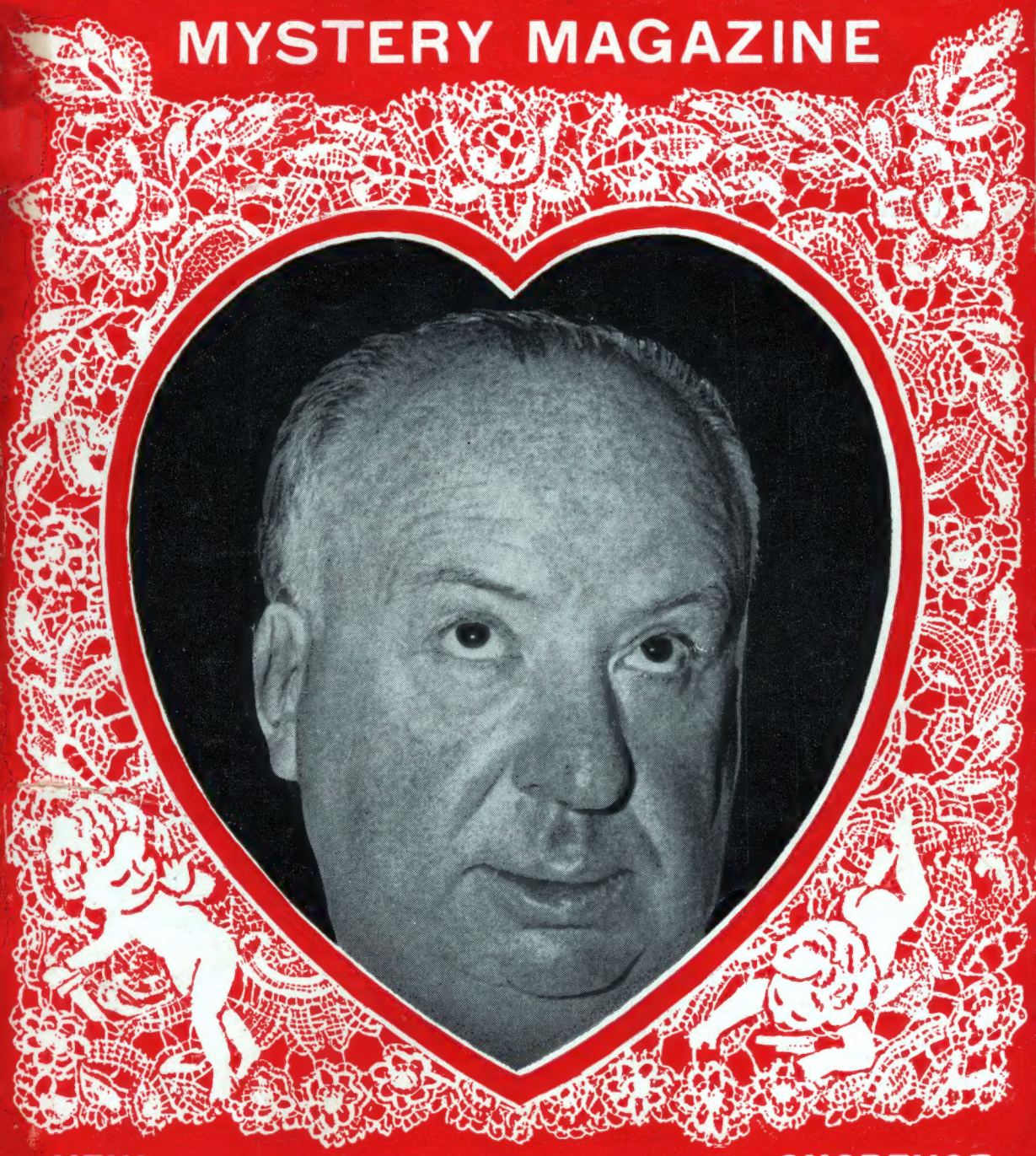

NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

Dear Readers,

Plumbers, notwithstanding, I shall continue to insist that the heart is more than a pump. At this time of year, as you know, it is drawn without the technical details of aorta and right and left ventricles and is trimmed with a fine lace and one Alfred Hitchcock. In this connection, I might note, that many of my seamier friends are already saying—as is their wont—"Be my Valentine, or else!"

Also apropos of the season, many of the stories in this issue have a decidedly light touch—and rightly so. By this time we have broken the same, old—though finely fashioned—New Year's Resolutions and are beginning to feel human once again. It is therefore with pleasure that I present: *This Is A Watchbird Watching* You, *The Alectryomancer, Best Idea I Ever Have, Almost* and *Peephole*. If you find that they do not amuse you, in all likelihood you may still be suffering from January the First.

It is my heartfelt wish that all the stories which follow—the light as well as the profound—give you a shuddering good time.

Alfred Hitchcock

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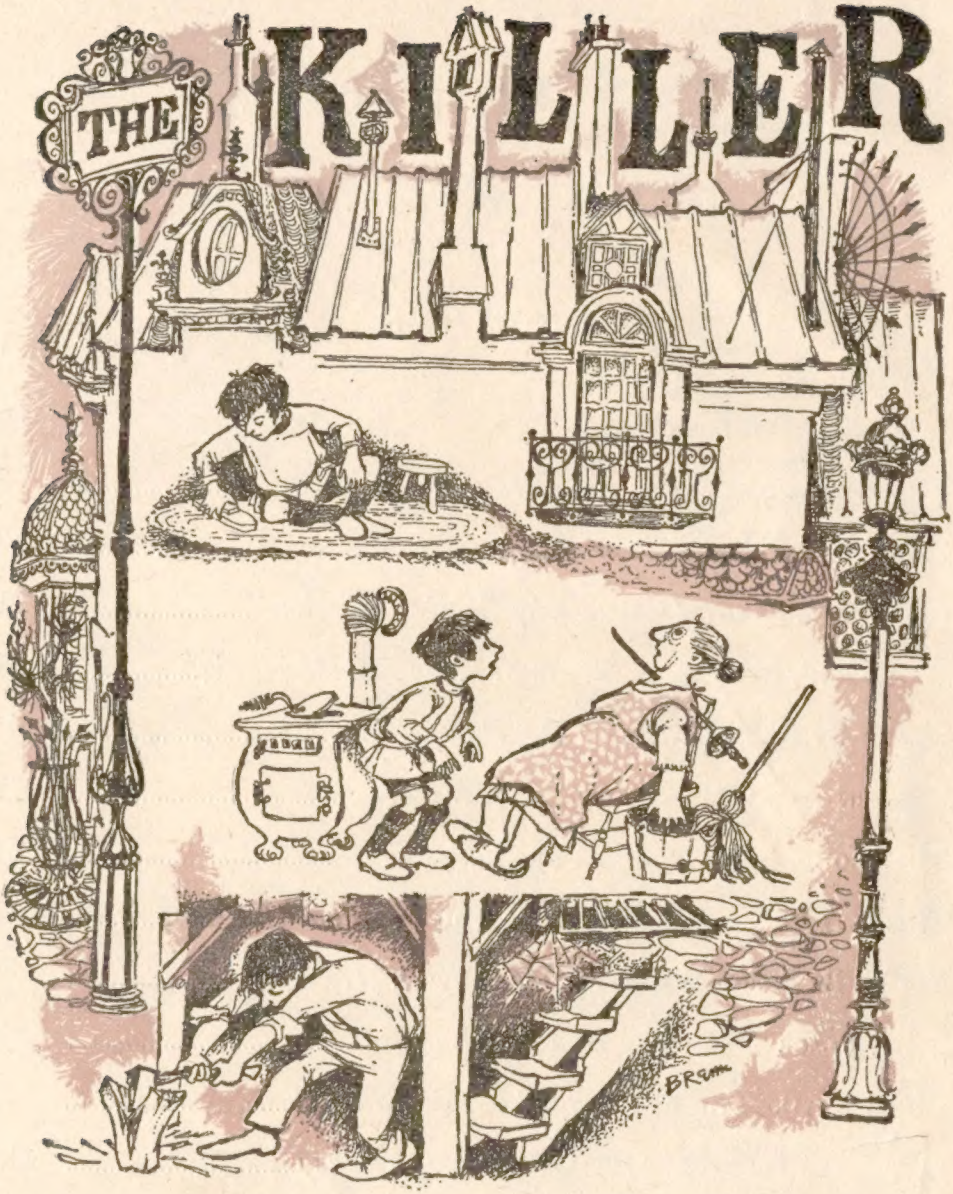

Have you noticed that a murder in Paris has a Gallic charm all its own? For example, instead of having a cop handle the case, the French present you with a Monsieur le Commissaire. In fact, their homicides are thoroughly cherchez la femme and corpus delicti, s'il vous plaît.

© George Langelaan 1958

by George Langelaan

Poor Mrs. Kyte was dead, as dead as the chicken she had just been trussing. I had never seen a dead person before, but there was no doubt about it, Mrs. Kyte was really dead. Her eyes, black and round, were open exactly like the chicken's, and the sword blade that had been driven in between her shoulders had come out of her scraggy neck, just under her chin.

She had the same semi-horrified look as the day when I had potted her with my Eureka pistol, a black shiny tin pistol that shot colored arrows that stuck on doors and walls provided the rubber sucker at the end had been well licked. Of course I had not shot her with my Eureka pistol to hurt her, but merely to see if the arrow would stick on human skin, and in spite of the criss-cross wrinkles that made such strange patterns on the loose skin of her neck, the arrow had stuck beautifully. She had had to pull it off.

As my brother Donald had been standing by, watching as I had shot her from the staircase, Mrs. Kyte had explained that we were both in the same boat and that she would rather not be in our shoes when our mother came home. We were both standing on the same stair, and it could conceivably be considered part of a boat, but we failed to understand the reference to our shoes. Why Mrs. Kyte should ever want to be, or not want to be, in our shoes, seemed really extraordinary. She had shoes of her own with funny round rubber heels. She always took them off first thing on arrival every morning, before taking off her coat and unwrapping the previous day's paper round her felt slippers.

But this was quite different. There would be such a to-do that I doubted very much whether our mother would send us to bed, as she usually did whenever we had broken anything or done anything really naughty. I could hear Donald pottering about upstairs and Dad chopping wood down in the cellar. I had just come in from the garden where I had been playing with the dog, but I had been in for a drink of water not five minutes before and had found Mrs. Kyte still alive plucking her chicken.

"Don!" I shouted. "Did you kill Mrs. Kyte?"

My brother's fat round face peered at me over the banisters.

"No. Is she dead?"

"Yes, she's dead."

"You boys must not say things like that," said my father coming up with a load of wood for the kitchen stove. "Poor Mrs. Kyte will think you don't like her."

I watched him walk through the kitchen door and heard him gasp, "Good God!" as he slowly put his load down.

"George, quick! Run round and

call the doctor. Tell him hurry!"

The doctor arrived just as mother turned the corner of the street, and she started running when she saw him entering our house.

"No, the boys are all right. It is Mrs. Kyte, dear . . . Something terrible has happened," said my father in a low voice trying in vain to keep mother from the kitchen.

We both stood watching the doctor bending over Mrs. Kyte, until Dad spotted us and slammed the door in our faces.

The Doctor came out first and went into the study where we heard him telephoning.

"Listen, he's calling the police," I whispered to my brother. And then I asked, "You think Mrs. Kyte will go to heaven?"

" 'Course not! Angels are always young and she's ever so old!"

We had been confined to our room best part of the afternoon, and it was getting dark when at last we heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

"They are both here, Monsieur le Commissaire," said my father unlocking our door. "No, I have not questioned them. George, that one, the eldest, found her first."

For what seemed quite a long time, the Commissaire stood looking at both of us. He was much bigger than our father, and his long brown moustache completely hid his mouth which suddenly gaped pink when he brushed it aside gently with his hand and said to me, "Come here, young man."

I said not a word as he carefully lifted the heavy First Empire cavalry pistol from my belt.

"Now listen, *mes enfants.* You know that a terrible thing has happened to Madame Kyte, your parents' charwoman?"

"Yes, she is dead, we know."

"Well now, tell me . . . What else do you know? What happened?"

"It's me . . . I shot her," said my brother.

"Don't be a fool," snapped my father. "Listen to this gentleman and answer his questions."

"Let him say, let him say," said the Commissaire with a smile. "And why did you shoot her, *mon petit?"*

"To go to hell."

"What!"

"I must explain, Monsieur le Commissaire," said father with a tired smile. "Only quite recently, we discovered that Mrs. Kyte had been talking religion to our children. From what the boys told me, she must have described Hell in such glowing colors that, instead of fearing damnation, they both showed a very keen interest in the place which my youngest asked me to take him to for our next outing."

"I see," said the Commissaire laughing. "Now you, George, where were you this morning?"

"In the garden, Monsieur."

"Doing what?"

"Nothing . . . Teaching my dog to jump."

"I see. Now, think well. Did you see anyone go by, or go in or come out of the house?"

"No."

"You are sure? Quite sure?"

"Yes."

"And you, what is your name?"

"Donald," said my brother bowing low in front of the surprised Commissaire.

Of course, the Commissaire could not know that my brother only bowed to people when he was in trouble, or when he did not know what to say. Only a few days before, he had been caught red-handed by our neighbor as he was about to ring her door bell, a little joke he had been playing on her for some weeks. Before she could so much as open her mouth, sweeping off his school cap, my brother had bowed deeply and walked quietly on, leaving her gaping.

"Donald, where were you this morning?"

"Playing here, Monsieur."

"Playing at what?"

"Playing with my paints."

The Commissaire walked over to the table on which Donald's paintbox was still open. He looked at various drawings and finally went to the door and talked to a man outside in the passage. We all waited in silence. There came a knock and the Commissaire again opened the door and took a sword blade from someone outside.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, showing the blade to us.

"Yes, it is the blade from our foils, and it is the one that killed Mrs. Kyte," I said. "But it has been cleaned; there is no blood on it."

"What do you mean, George? Explain, will you? No, let him," said the Commissaire, waving my father aside.

"It is the blade that was broken when we were fencing with Papa, in the garden the other day."

"But how is it that it has no handle?"

"Because we changed the blade—you cannot fence with a broken blade, it is dangerous," volunteered my brother.

"Where are your foils?"

With a flourish of his pudgy hand and a bow for the Commissaire, Donald opened the high cupboard where we kept our toys, and the Commissaire stood bewildered as we tossed out a Touareg leather shield, a long barrelled, mother-of-pearl inlaid Arab rifle, half a dozen boxing gloves, an old fashioned long bow that must have belonged to some giant, French and English flags, and a knight's steel helmet and visor.

"I buy those things at the flea-fair," explained my father. "They are much cheaper than toys and, of course, much stronger."

Donald at last produced our fencing masks and foils.

"There, you see, that is the one with the new blade," he said hand-

ing one of the foils to the Commissaire. "To change the blade, you unscrew the handle and pull, it all comes to pieces."

"Yes, I see," said the Commissaire. "When did you say this blade was broken?"

"The other day when we were fencing in the garden. Papa and I lunged both at the same time."

"And when did you change the blade?"

"The next day," answered my father. "But I took out the broken blade immediately; I didn't want them playing with it like that."

"And what did you do with the broken blade?"

"I . . . I forget."

"You put it in the cellar so that we shouldn't find it," said my brother.

"Yes, that is right."

"Which of you found it?"

"I did, in the coal," said my brother.

"And was it pointed like it is now?" asked the Commissaire quietly, pointing to the sharpened end of the broken foil.

"Was it you who sharpened it, then?"

"N . . . n . . . no."

"Do you know who sharpened it?"

"No."

"You are quite sure that Madame Kyte was in no way related to you?" said the Commissaire turning to my father who had become very pale.

"Of course not, Monsieur le Commissaire."

"You will admit that its surprising that you are an English family, and that your charlady is also English, no?"

"No. My wife met Mrs. Kyte at the English Church in Paris, and as she was looking for work, my wife took her on."

"Yes, but Madame Kyte was born Bolton, and so were you."

"That I did not know. A coincidence, Monsieur le Commissaire."

"Yes, perhaps. I hope for your sake that there will not be too many other coincidences."

Every day, it seemed, our parents were being visited and questioned —sometimes separately and sometimes together—by the Commissaire and other gentlemen. Often too, my father would have to go to the central police station, no doubt for more questioning.

My brother and I had not been questioned any more, but we were of course all eyes and ears for the Commissaire and his men, especially when they started measuring the passage from the cellar door to the kitchen. Dad's tool box was carefully emptied over an open newspaper and after putting the tools back one by one, the Commissaire had carefully folded up the paper containing all the chips of wood, screws, rusty nails and dust that had fallen out of the bottom of the box.

"Do you think it might perhaps

have been thrown like a javelin?" asked one of the Commissaire's men one morning, as they stood discussing by the kitchen door.

"No. The Doctor says that it must have been driven in with great force. He is even surprised that, whoever did it, was able to drive it in so hard without the handle. He thinks it must have been wrapped in a cloth or something."

"It couldn't have been shot from a rifle, could it?"

"Don't be ridi . . . Come up to the children's room a minute. I have an idea."

We were both playing quietly, much too quietly, with our Mecano set by the time the two men reached the top of the stairs.

They came into our room and, without a word, the Commissaire opened our toy cupboard. He rummaged around and soon pulled out the long bow.

"Have you ever played with this, you two?"

"No, Monsieur. It is too stiff."

"Was it strung . . . had it got a string like this to it when your father bought it?"

"Yes. Papa says it is an old English long bow."

"It must have belonged to a mighty strong man," said the Commissaire's assistant holding up the bow and drawing the waxed hide-string back a bare foot.

"Yes, and we have no giants here," said the Commissaire smiling at us. "What is that? I did not notice it the other day," he added, pointing to the big trunk in the corner.

"That is for when we play at submarines, and that is our periscope," I explained, raising up the long tube protruding from the lid of the trunk.

"It looks like a real one."

"Yes, Monsieur, it is a real one; it was used in the trenches during the war, and Papa fixed it like this for us."

Amused, the Commissaire raised the lid of the trunk and bent down.

"Where does this come from?" he asked, holding a long file.

"It belongs to Papa. He must have left it there when he fixed our periscope," said my brother pulling up and arranging his stockings.

The Commissaire and his assistant left the room without saying any more.

"Why did you lift your stockings?" I asked my brother after having closed our door.

"Mummy always tells us to."

"Yes, but you don't. It's because you were lying. You always do funny things when you are lying."

"I wasn't."

The Commissaire came back the next day and stayed with us in our room best part of the afternoon, and I sat fascinated, watching him examining us one after the other, but his eyes always returning to Donald every time he pulled up his stockings. He at last bent over to-

wards my brother and pulled down one, then both his stockings.

"How did you graze your shins, young man?" he asked, smiling.

"I don't know. In the garden, I think," said my brother very red in the face.

"Yes, I see," said the Commissaire getting up at last and leaving the room.

No sooner were we alone than Donald started thumbing through one of the large illustrated books which he kept on the floor under his bed. I was still trying to understand something which I could feel I was just on the point of understanding though I did not know what, and therefore took no notice when my brother tore a page out of his book. A little later, I noticed that he was chewing something and thinking it was a sweet, asked him to give me one. Without answering he pushed out a mouthful of chewed paper on the end of his tongue and then went on quietly chewing and swallowing it.

The Commissaire came in again just as he was gulping down a last mouthful. Blushing deeply, my brother closed the book still open on his knees. Without a word, the Commissaire picked it up and ran through its pages until he came to the one that had been torn out.

"Is that what you were eating? What was on that page?" he asked. "Do you know?" he added turning to me.

"No, Monsieur."

"It was a picture, was it not?" he said putting the book gently down in front of my brother. "Won't you tell me what the picture showed? Don't you realize that there are many other copies of this book and that, if I want to, I can get another just like it?"

Standing up, Donald waved his arm gracefully and bowed deeply to the Commissaire who walked out unable to repress a smile.

When my father came home that afternoon, the Commissaire was waiting for him and instead of coming into the house, they walked round to the back garden and stood talking on the lawn.

I was in the kitchen, watching my mother making the tea, when we heard father shout and a moment later he came running into the house.

"Quick! My God! . . . It's happened again!" he shouted.

The Doctor was positive. The Commissaire had been stabbed through the heart with the broken blade of a fencing foil. It had been an upward thrust of such force that the end of the blade had reached the spine.

"But I tell you I don't know! We were standing there, talking . . ."

"Talking about what, Monsieur?" interrupted one of the police inspectors who had arrived shortly after the tragedy.

"About my sons and their education."

"Yes, go on."

"Well, we were standing talking and, suddenly the Commissaire bent forward and then fell backwards, the blade in his chest."

"But you don't really expect us to believe that, do you, Monsieur?"

Mother cried, and we both cried, and even father's eyes were full of tears, but he had to go with the policemen that night.

Dry eyed and looking very tired, mother woke up as usual for school next morning.

"Now, please children, hurry up," she said. "You will have to go to school without me this morning and you will lunch at the school canteen. I have much to do today."

"Donald! Give me my stockings!" I shouted, pounding on the bathroom door a few minutes later, when I discovered that he had left me his and taken mine.

"Be quiet! What does it matter? Come down and get your breakfast now," said mother at the bottom of the stairs.

"But Mum, they are . . ." and I said no more because, all of a sudden I knew why they were stained and stiff with dried blood. Rolling them up quickly, I stuffed them into my school satchel and found myself another pair in the wardrobe. I knew that telling mother was useless. I would have to see the police inspector, the one who had been with the Commissaire when he had come to visit our room.

Avoiding school proved easier than I had feared. My brother simply ran straight into the playground with two other boys of his class, without noticing that I had walked on and quickly ducked round the corner at the end of the street, fearing that one of the teachers would see me and call me back.

At the police station, I hesitated a long time. I could see plenty of policemen in uniform, but none of the Inspectors.

"What are doing here, and why aren't you in school?" asked a cyclist policeman coming up behind me.

"Please, *Monsieur l'Agent,* I want to see the Commissaire."

"He is not here today."

"Yes, I know, he is dead. But it is the gentleman who was always with him that I want to see."

"About what?"

"About my father . . . He did not kill him!"

"You are the son of the . . . But your father is not here, *mon garcon."*

"Have they let him go?"

"No. He is at . . . but you had better go to school—you are already late, you know."

"But I know who killed the Commissaire! It is not my father, *Monsieur l'Agent,* it is not my father!" I sobbed.

"Who was it then?" asked someone bending over me and handing me a large handkerchief that smelt of tobacco.

"I'm not sure . . . We must find the picture," I stammered, smiling

through my tears at the Commissaire's assistant who had recognized me.

"What picture?"

"The picture my brother ate."

"Come into my office and tell me all about it, will you?"

"Yes, please, Monsieur."

Having blown my nose in his handkerchief, I was at last able to tell him how the Commissaire had found my brother eating a picture out of a book, and how he had said that he would get another copy of the book to see what the picture was.

"And what was the picture? Do you remember?"

"No," I lied, "but it must have been important."

"And what makes you think that it was important?" asked the Inspector glancing up at three other men sitting round the room.

"I think that, perhaps, it shows how the Commissaire was killed."

"But, how could it? How was he killed, do you think? You must tell me all you know and all you think if you want to help your Papa."

"I think that my brother killed the Commissaire."

"Your little brother?"

"Yes."

"But, *mon pauvre petit,* it is impossible! Don't you like your brother?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think that he killed the Commissaire?"

"Because the Commissaire knew that he had killed Mrs. Kyte and was going to tell."

"So! Your little brother has also killed Madame Kyte? How, do you know?"

"With the bow, I think."

There was a sudden silence in the room, and the other men looked enquiringly at the Inspector who had risen behind his desk.

"The Commissaire did at one time wonder if the broken blade of the foil had not been shot in some fashion, and in looking over the children's room, we found an old rifle and a long bow, but so stiff that a normal man could not have drawn it, let alone a child . . . And this youngster must have heard us talking . . ."

"Yes, and so did my brother. And that is why he ate the picture in the book . . . and the Commissaire saw him eat it!"

There was another long silence, and at last the Inspector said, "No . . . doesn't make sense. Think, even supposing that the blade that killed the charwoman had been shot from a bow, the one that killed the Commissaire could not. Remember, it was an upward strike!"

"Donald was in the cellar, and there is a little window by the kitchen steps, next to the dog's kennel. And the bow was not in the toy cupboard until that night."

"You hate your little brother, don't you," said one of the men quietly paring his nails.

"We've wasted enough time," said another. "What was the book from which your brother tore out a picture?"

"We have quite a lot of them at home. They are called: *Le Journal des Voyages.*"

"Yes, I know it. A magazine that was published last century, I think. Which one was it, do you know? Had it got a date or a number?"

"It was the one for the year 1879."

Half an hour later, holding me by the hand, the Inspector led me into the local pubic library. In a very short time, an assistant came and put down a large, black cloth-bound volume on a table in front of us.

"It is not the same," I whispered. "The books we have are red."

"A different binding, but you are going to see that it is the very same book," said the Inspector opening it.

"Yes, you are right, it is!"

"You don't remember the page number, do you?"

"No, but it was a picture on a right hand page."

The Inspector turned over the pages one by one, and when at last he did reach the illustration which my brother had torn out, he did not even have to ask me whether that was the one. He knew as well as I did.

It was a detailed and very fine steel engraving of some South American Indian shooting down large birds with a tremendous bow. Lying on his back, the hunter held the bow horizontally across his two feet and, holding on to the string with both hands, he simply drew the bow by straightening out his body.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" said the Inspector marking the book and putting it under his arm, "How did you guess?"

"Because the bow string hurt his legs and he tried to hide it. Look, I have his stockings still full of blood. And that made me remember the picture."

"But you said you did not know what the picture was?"

"I wanted to be sure."

"But why did your brother do that?"

"I don't know. I think it is true that he wanted to be sure of going to Hell."

My brother Donald will be twenty-one next month and will be coming out of the reformatory. I have just signed on for the Foreign Legion. There was nothing else I could do. Every time my mother has been to visit him—once a month for the last nine years—he has always told her the same thing: that he intends killing me as soon as he can.

PEEPHOLE o O O

by Henry Slesar

Store detectives are a harried, anonymous lot though they toil up and down aisles and escalators to preserve the fiction that is known as private property. At long last, in PEEPHOLE, a trace of recognition is accorded this segment of our economy, barely perceptible on even clear days, due to the turbulence that is known as the woman shopper. And in PEEPHOLE—of necessity—there is the shoplifter stealing with commendable industry from nine-to-five who meets our hero, as is always the case in what is known as the love story. Surprise, uncertainty—or suspense—follows. And our hero who has, in his day, searched just about everybody, finally, searches his very own heart.

Nelson Latch was a difficult man to pick out of a crowd. He was of average height and weight, neither homely nor handsome, dull of hair and eye, and inconspicuous of dress. However, his nondescript manner and appearance made him ideal for his occupation. He was a store detective at Bramson's Store for Women in New York.

For eleven years, Nelson had

performed his job quietly and competently on the seven floors of Bramson's. Hundreds of shoplifters had suffered the penalties of their crime because of Nelson's sad and watchful eyes. Dozens of dishonest clerks had come to grief because of Nelson's diligence. Vandals, kleptomaniacs, and even hold-up men had been taught respect for the innocent, gray-suited man who prowled the aisles of Bramson's and guarded its right to receive lawful payment for its merchandise.

Bramson's was a good-sized establishment, catering to many classes of women—from the budget dress racks in the basement, to the Paris originals in the Gold Salon on the Sixth Floor. It employed a cadre of store detectives of which Nelson Latch was senior member. Naturally, when a delicate and disturbing situation arose, Nelson Latch was the first name mentioned in the executive suite on the Seventh Floor.

He received his summons to Mr. Bramson's office on a slow morning in early January. Mr. Bramson, the son of the founder, was a nervous, fussy little man, who had been installed in the President's chair only three years ago, and hadn't yet found it comfortable. He squirmed around for a full minute before getting to the subject of the interview.

"This business can drive you crazy," he said finally. "If it isn't one thing, it's another. Crooks you can expect in the basement, maybe, but who would think in the Gold Salon?"

Nelson cleared his throat and looked surprised. "Crooks, Mr. Bramson? I hadn't heard about it."

"For two weeks it's been going on, only I didn't get you fellas mixed in. You know how it is, our biggest customers come to the Gold Salon. We gotta be careful."

"Thefts, Mr. Bramson?"

"Big thefts. Not in volume, in quantity. But hundred dollar dresses, good belts, suits. We don't even know what's gone until inventory time."

Nelson whistled. "Sales clerk, maybe?"

"No, it's a customer all right. But maybe a salesgirl is helping. But what can we do about it?"

"Do you know how she operates?"

"Sure. You know how the Gold Salon is laid out. In the back of the main showroom, there are four dressing booths. The women go in there, change their clothes, try on dresses. That's where she does her stuff. Puts on a Bramson dress *under* her own dress, walks off like nothing happened."

Nelson frowned. "Must be something we can do."

"Other stores have such problems, too. Some of them make sure the salesgirls stay with the customers. We can't afford to do that. We'd have to double our sales force! Some stores hand out tickets with every dress, so they can keep

tabs on 'em. But how would that kind of cheap stuff go in the Gold Salon? Our customers would be insulted!" Then he stopped fidgeting and leaned forward with his hands folded. "But I think maybe I got the answer," he said shrewdly. "You know what one-way glass is?"

"Yes. That's the glass mirrored on one side and clear on the other."

"Right." he chuckled. "And you know those mirrors that hang in the dressing booths? Well, I changed all those mirrors, Nelson."

The detective blinked. "Why, that's very clever of you, Mr. Bramson."

"Thank you! Now we're gonna catch our little thief in action. We're gonna *see* her work her fancy tricks. That'll put a stop to it!"

"I guess it will."

"Now there's just one more thing we need, Nelson. Somebody reliable. Somebody who can really spot our little friend when she goes to work.

Nelson's normally pale face reddened.

"You don't mean *me,* Mr. Bramson? Don't you think a *woman* should—"

"Ideally, yes. But like I said, it could be that the thief has a confederate, right in the store, one of our own girls. Who could I trust? And I don't want to go outside for help—this is too confidential. And I look at it this way, Nelson. A detective is like a doctor, a physician. There's nothing personal; it's a job. Am I right or wrong?"

"Well, I really don't know—"

"Of course you know. You're an experienced man, Nelson. You can spot our thief like *that.*" He snapped his fingers. "So you'll have to see some women taking their clothes off. What is that? On a beach, on any beach, you can see a lot more. And you're a married man, no?"

"No, sir," Nelson said.

"No difference. The big thing is that you can do the job, Nelson. If it's okay with you, you can start tomorrow."

Mr. Bramson rose quickly from his chair and stuck out his hand. Nelson Latch had no choice but to shake it limply, in grudging agreement.

The next morning, for the first time in years, Nelson slept through the insistent ring of his alarm clock. He had read enough about psychology to recognize that his dereliction was due to his unwillingness to face this particular morning. His new assignment was completely repellent to him. It wasn't detective work at all, but a form of snooping which Nelson associated with bedroom spies and other low orders of the profession. Even worse, the idea of being a spectator to a series of strip acts was terrifying. Nelson was forty-four, and an unadventurous bachelor.

He reported to Miss Dewey, the

long-nosed manager of the Gold Salon, at eight-thirty.

"Come with me," she said disdainfully. She led him to the dressing room. There were four booths in a row, generous-sized, comfortable booths, with red velvet drapes forming the doors. Each was large enough to contain a small, bow-legged plush chair, a metal rack with wooden hangers, a narrow shelf, and an antique-framed mirror. It all seemed perfectly innocent, but when Miss Dewey led Nelson through a side door that exposed the rear of the booths, he saw the four squares of glass that admitted a clear view of the interiors.

"I don't mind telling you," Miss Dewey sniffed, "that I'm against this. Our clientele is *very* respectable."

"At least one of them isn't," he said gently.

"That may be true. But if word of this — this snooping ever got out—"

"It won't," Nelson said. "Not if we're *all* discreet."

When she left him alone, Nelson sat wearily on the chair that had been provided him, and hoped that traffic would be light in the Bramson dressing room that morning.

At nine-thirty, he heard the sound of women's voices. He groaned, and got up to make a canvas of the four booths. A stout matron, carrying a girlishly cut dress over her arm, entered Booth One. He watched her as she pulled a tight-fitting dress over her head. He gulped hard when she stood revealed in a complicated foundation garment that enclosed her frame like a suit of pink armor. He was relieved when she slipped the Bramson garment over it and stepped out of the booth, to the cooing approval of the salesgirl who said: "Mrs. Busch, that dress is *you*."

There were six more women in the booths that morning, all roughly cast in the same plump, matronly role. In the afternoon, a thin one appeared, a sharp-featured woman who looked like every sour-faced schoolteacher Nelson had ever known. He was startled when he saw that her underthings were designed to look like leopard skin.

By the end of the day, Nelson was hardened to the sight of women undressing. The next morning, he was on time.

The first visitor to the Bramson dressing booth was an attractive woman in her early forties. He watched her strip with a little less detachment than he had shown the day before. He was disillusioned when she began to scratch. She scratched furiously, and she scratched everywhere. Then she put on a Bramson gown and walked out coolly.

By Friday, the job seemed routine. Then *she* arrived.

She was a blonde. Her hair was a shining gold frame for her full-mouthed, wide-eyed face. She was

slim, but her suit was generously cut. When her white fingers began delicately peeling off her clothes, Nelson Latch knew that he was witnessing, in the flesh, the kind of girl that racy magazines featured on their covers. He backed away from the one-way glass when he saw that his breath had frosted it over, and watched her precise movements with more than professional interest.

There was no concealing garment beneath the suit: just a frosty-white brassiere and startlingly brief panties. She posed like a calendar girl, holding up one of the two dresses she had brought into the booth and examining it. She wriggled her way into it, and tugged it around her neat hips until satisfied with its fit. Then she left the booth, walking straight and poised.

He waited anxiously for her return. When it came, he pressed his face against the glass. He was rewarded by a closeup of the girl's face, a lovely, vaguely Egyptian face, with sloe eyes and a blazingly red mouth. She was looking into the mirror and smiling at her own image. To Nelson, it seemed as if she were smiling directly at him.

Then she pulled the dress over her head, and picked up the second garment. She put it on, looked in the mirror once more, and seemed pleased.

But instead of leaving the booth, she picked up the skirt of her tweed suit and slipped it on over the dress. She did the same with the jacket. The full-cut suit fitted her better now, and Nelson know why it hadn't fit her terrific figure snugly before.

She was his thief.

He moaned as if he were in pain. Such a lovely girl! And *he* had to be the one to end her freedom. How could he do it?

Nelson found that he couldn't. He stood stupidly behind the booth that had been the scene of the crime, and allowed the blonde criminal to walk off nonchalantly with Bramson's merchandise. He heard her talking to the salesgirl, expressing indecision about the purchase, and making promises of returning the following week.

Then she was gone.

Nelson sat down weakly in his chair and put his hands to his face. Eleven years of honest service seemed to have vanished under the influence of this one dishonest act. He felt like a criminal himself, yet the feeling wasn't strong enough to combat the other emotion that was rising strongly within his inconspicuous body.

Nelson Latch was in love.

The blonde didn't return for two days, and Nelson didn't know if he was glad or sorry. He wanted to see her again; there wasn't any question of that. Yet if he were forced to witness another crime—could his conscience withstand it?

On Wednesday, she walked into Booth Two.

She was wearing a loose-fitting gray dress this time, and when he saw its exaggerated size, Nelson was despondent. She peeled it off quickly, and tried on a blue Princess-line dress of comparatively modest price. When she walked outside, he heard her make the purchase.

At first, the detective thought she had turned honest. A moment later, he knew that she was only exercising wisdom by making an occasional purchase to allay suspicion. When the salesgirl bustled off to find her order book, the blonde reentered the booth with a Paris original under her arm. With the aplomb of a professional, she slipped it over her head, and covered it up with her loose-fitting gray dress.

Just before she left, the blonde looked into the mirror.

Nelson put his face close to the glass.

"Don't do it," he whispered. "Please don't do it."

She cocked her head, almost as if she could hear him.

"You're too pretty to be a thief. They'll catch you one of these days. Please give it up. Please!"

She had her mouth open, and was inspecting her upper teeth for traces of lipstick.

Then she winked.

Nelson was taken aback, until he realized that the wink was intended for herself alone, a congratulatory wink on her criminal success.

Then she went out.

Nelson Latch had never been a moody man before, but his present difficulties changed him. His few friends became quickly aware of it, and he had to content himself more and more with solitude. He found himself taking long walks in the park, reading the sort of romantic literature he had never broached before, noticing the size of the moon over the city skyscrapers, listening to the love lyrics of popular songs as if they had taken on new meaning. Each workday found him tormented by conflicting emotions: a passionate desire to see the blonde thief again, a passionate hope that she would no longer give Bramson's her dubious business.

But at least twice a week, normally on Wednesdays and Fridays, the sloe-eyed criminal would show up. On some days, she was honest, but Nelson was no longer deceived by what was obviously a criminal tactic. Other days, she would rob the Gold Salon of its most expensive garments, under the very eyes of Bramson's most reliable detective.

He talked to her always now, safely inaudible behind the thick, one-way glass.

"You're so beautiful," he would whisper. "You're like an angel.

Why do you have to steal? Why?"

Once, he confided his secret to her.

"I love you," he said. "I'll take care of you. You won't have to steal anymore, my darling . . ."

Then, on a Thursday afternoon in late February, more than five weeks after his vigil began, the worst happened.

He was summoned to Mr. Bramson's office.

"I know what you're going to say," Nelson mumbled, shuffling his feet. "But I just haven't been able to spot our thief yet, Mr. Bramson."

The little man mopped at his brow. "It's going on too long, I'm getting worried, Nelson. I don't mind telling you."

"Just give me a little more time, Mr. Bramson—"

"Time? We haven't got the time! Over a thousand dollars worth of merchandise stolen! And what's even worse—they're starting to talk about it."

"Talk about what?"

"I don't know how it got out," the President said. "I guess you can't hide such things from the salespeople. They're spreading a lot of filthy rumors around town, about how we got a *man* peeking in on the dressing rooms. That kind of thing can cost us more than a few stolen dresses, Nelson. You see what I mean?"

Nelson couldn't speak.

"It's nothing against you, personal. I'm sure you're doing your best, Nelson. Only you gotta understand the situation. If people ever found out you were watching 'em, they'd stop coming to Bramson's. Thieves, customers, everybody!"

"But Mr. Bramson—"

"Can't be helped, Nelson. I'm putting Marjorie on the peepholes tomorrow morning."

"Please, give me a little more time. Just one more day! There's somebody I suspect, but I need a little more evidence. It's Friday tomorrow; she's usually here on Friday."

The President looked doubtful. "I dunno—"

"What can it hurt? I've been up there for almost two months. What can one more day hurt?"

"All right," Mr. Bramson said. "One more day, and that's all. I'll bet you'll be relieved, huh, Nelson?"

But Nelson Latch didn't look relieved. He looked miserable.

He spent the entire morning of the following day praying that his blonde thief would show up.

There was a letter in his pocket, a letter carefully prepared the night before.

It read:

Dear Lady,

I am a store detective at Bramson's, and I know that

you have been taking merchandise from the Gold Salon. The store plans to catch you in the act next week. I urge you to stay away. I love you.

Yours truly,
A Friend

By four o'clock, Nelson was unable to sit still. He paced the floor up and down behind the dressing booths, wringing his hands and muttering to himself.

Then, at four-thirty, he saw a flash of light in Booth Three, and hurried over.

It was the blonde.

She was carrying two dresses, both priced at over a hundred and fifty dollars. She examined them both, and seemed to be deciding on which was least desirable. That was the one she hung on the hanger. The other, she slipped over her head.

When she left the booth with the purloined dress beneath her own, Nelson knew the time for action had come. He deserted his post, told Miss Dewey, the Gold Salon manager, that he would be back shortly, and followed the blonde out of the department.

She was already on the Down escalator by the time he caught sight of her. He followed at a respectable distance, one hand toying with the white envelope jutting out of his pocket.

The week-end crowds were heavy. He had trouble keeping her in sight as she disappeared into the revolving doors leading to the street. For one dreadful moment on the sidewalk, he thought he had lost her. Then he saw her shining golden head bending into the rear of a taxi.

Nelson slapped his thigh in vexation, and waved his hand frantically at another cruising taxi. He jumped in with the traditional order.

"Follow that cab!"

He leaned forward in his seat throughout the trip, keeping his eye on the blonde head in the rear window of the vehicle they were trailing. It was a long ride uptown, almost into the Bronx.

Finally, he saw her cab slow down before a brownstone house in the middle of a quiet street. He waited until she had ascended the stoop before getting out and paying the driver.

He went up the stone stairs and looked at the row of nameplates on the side of the door. There were four of them. Which one belonged to her?

He went into the building, moving quietly, not wanting to be seen. All Nelson Latch wanted to do was warn her; he expected no gratitude.

There was a door on the first floor. He put his head against it and listened to the strident sounds of a television commercial. A

child's voice complained about dinner, and a gruff masculine voice told it to shut up.

He went to the second floor.

The door was lightly ajar, and a razor-thin crack of light slanted over the stairs. He put his fingertips on the wood and pushed gently. The door gave, and he was looking into a cozy living room. Standing in the center, yanking her dress over her head to reveal the stolen garment beneath, was the blonde.

Nelson slipped the letter out of his pocket and bent down to push it under the door. It made a slight hissing noise as it touched the carpet, and the blonde's head jerked towards the door. Before he could dodge aside, she had seen him. She started to scream immediately.

"Please!" Nelson said. "Don't be scared. I'm a friend!"

The word didn't convince her; she went right on shrieking.

"I have something for you—a letter—"

He advanced towards her timorously, holding out the white envelope in his hand as if it would protect him against her hysteria. She backed away as if the paper were contaminated, and he dropped it on a table.

"Read it, please! It'll explain everything. You'll see—I'm just trying to help you—"

The more he protested, the more the blonde screamed. From below, Nelson heard the babble of voices in the hallway, and the girl looked wildly at the door. He gestured at her helplessly, and then grew panicky. He turned and went out the door, then began a gallop down the stairs. He ended up in the arms of a patrolman, summoned to the scene by the girl's alarmed neighbors. He didn't struggle much.

It wasn't the first time Nelson Latch had been in a police station, but never in the role of the accused.

The desk sergeant said: "What's the charge, Murphy?"

The cop said: "Peeping Tom."

At first, Nelson Latch opened his mouth to protest. Then he decided that even an unrequited love was better than none at all. He held his head up, with a martyr's pride, and said nothing.

by Charles Willeford

A GENUINE ALECTRYOMANCER

You probably won't find "alectryomancer" in your dictionary. Our story tells all.

ON THE surface, the situation is quite mad, and yet there appears to be an irrefutable logic in the chain of incidents leading to my predicament. There it floats, bobbing, just beyond my grasp, and I have to believe that if I don't snag it with my fingers this time I certainly shall on the next or the next stroke . . . and I *must* keep swimming, keep trying. There isn't much else I can do!

Where did the old alectryomancer come from in the first place? I didn't see or hear him approach on the soft sand. I looked up from the sea and there he was, waiting patiently for me to recognize him. The blue denim rags covering his thin hips and shanks were clean. His dusky skin was the shade of wet No. 2 sandpaper, and he held a shredded-brimmed straw hat in his right hand. Once he had my attention he nodded his head amiably and smiled, exposing toothless gums the color of a rotten mango.

"What do you want?" I said rudely. One of my chief reasons for renting a cottage on the island of Bequia was the private beach.

"Please excuse my intrusion, Mr. Waxman," the native said politely, "but when I heard that the author of *Cockfighting in the Zone of Interior* had rented a cottage on Princess Margaret Beach I wanted to congratulate him in person."

I was mollified, and at the same time, taken aback. Of course, I had written *Cockfighting in the Zone of Interior,* but it was a thin pamphlet, privately printed, issued in a limited edition of five hundred copies. The pamphlet had been written at the request of two well-to-do Florida cockfighters who hoped to gain support for the sport from an eastern syndicate, and I had been well-paid. But it certainly wasn't the type of booklet to wind up in the hands of a Bequian native in the British West Indies.

"Where did you get a copy of that?" I said, getting to my feet and brushing the damp sand off my swimming trunks.

"Gamecocks are my source of livelihood," he replied simply. "And I read everything I can concerning gamefowl. Your pamphlet, sir, was excellent."

"Thank you, but my information was excellent. I didn't know you fought gamecocks on Bequia, however. According to an English mandate passed in 1857, cockfighting was forbidden throughout the Empire."

"I don't fight gamecocks, Mr. Waxman." He smiled again and held up a hand. "My interest in gamefowl lies in a parallel art: alectryomancy."

I laughed, but I was interested. I had gone to Bequia because it was a peaceful little island in the Grenadines, and I had hoped to finish a novel. But in three months time I hadn't written a line. Bored, and with little to do but stare sullenly at the sea, I found myself enjoying this curious encounter.

"That's a parallel art," I agreed, "but I didn't know there were any practitioners of alectryomancy left in the Atomic Age."

"My rooster has made some fascinating predictions concerning the atom, Mr. Waxman," the alectryomancer confided. "If you would care to visit me some time, we could discuss his findings. Or possibly, you might be more interested

in obtaining a personal reading—"

"I don't need a gamecock to make predictions for me," I said truthfully. "If I don't get some work done on my book soon I'll run out of money and be forced to return to the States and look for work."

"Isn't your writing going well?"

"It isn't going at all."

"Then there must be a reason. And only through alectryomancy—"

I cut the interview short and returned to my cottage. After fixing a cup of coffee and thinking about the odd meeting for a few minutes I came to the conclusion that there might possibly be an article in it. Three or four thousand words on the old fellow's occupation might conceivably find a market in the U. S., and I wasn't getting anywhere with my novel. Of course, alectryomancy is usually considered as a false science, on a par with astrology. A circle is described on the bare ground; the alphabet is then written around the outer edge of the circle and a grain of corn is placed on each letter. A rooster is tethered to a stake in the center by his left leg, and then as he pecks a grain of corn from the various letters, the letters are written down, in order, and a message of—the science is crazy, really! For one thing, before there could be any validity to the message, the rooster would have to be able to understand a language. And a chicken's brain is about the size of a BB. Still, an article about a practicing alectryomancer would be of interest to a great many people, and I needed the money.

I didn't look the alectryomancer up immediately; things are not done so speedily in the West Indies. I prepared myself for the impending interview by thinking about it for a couple of days, and then made my way to the seer's shack on Mt. Pleasant. Bequia is a small island, and it wasn't difficult to learn where he lived.

"Where," I asked my maid, "does the old man with the rooster live?"

It is to the woman's credit that she knew to whom I referred, because every resident on the island owns a few chickens and at least one rooster. She gave directions I could understand, and even went so far as to draw a crude map with her finger on the sandy beach in front of the cottage.

Mt. Pleasant isn't a high mountain, but the path was crooked and steep and the walk of forty minutes had winded me by the time I reached the old man's shack at the peak. He greeted me warmly, and invited me to enjoy the loveliness of his view. Nine miles away, the volcanic, verdant mass of St. Vincent loomed above the sea, and behind us toward the southwest, the smaller islands of the Grenadines glimmered like emeralds.

"Your view is beautiful," I said, when I was breathing normally again.

"We like it," the old native nodded his head.

"We?"

"My rooster and me."

"Oh, yes," I said casually, snapping my fingers. "I'd like to take a look at him."

A low whistle from the alectryomancer and the rooster marched sedately out of the shack he shared with his master and joined us in the clearing. He was a large whitish bird of about six pounds, with brown and red feathers splashing his wings and chest. His comb was unclipped, and his dark red wattles dangled almost to his breast. He eyed me suspiciously for a moment, cocking his head alertly to one side, and crowed deep in his throat before turning away to scratch listlessly in the dirt.

"Looks like a Whitehackle cross."

"Correct, Mr. Waxman," the alectryomancer said respectfully. "His mother was a purebred Wild Jungle Fowl."

"I suspected as much. Only purebred gamecocks can be utilized in alectryomancy, as you must know," I added pedantically.

"Of course."

For a few moments we sat quietly on the ground watching the rooster, and then I cleared my throat. "As long as I'm here, I may as well have a reading."

"I'll change my clothes." The old man smiled, exposing his raw gums for my inspection, before hobbling painfully into his shack. The shack itself was an unusual structure, built of five-gallon oil tins, smashed flat, and topped by a mauve-colored fifty-gallon oil drum, which held, I presumed, rain water. Forming an even square around the clearing were several dozen additional five-gallon tins, each containing a potted arrowroot plant. I don't suppose an alectryomancer does too much business on a small island, and the arrowroot plants probably supplemented the old man's income.

I was unprepared for the change in attire and started slightly when the alectryomancer reappeared. A dirty white cotton turban had been wrapped around his bald head, and he wore a long-sleeved blue work shirt buttoned to the neck. Tiny red felt hearts, clubs, spades and diamonds had been sewn in thick profusion on the shirt, and larger hearts, clubs, spades and diamonds had been sewn on the pair of faded khaki trousers he now wore instead of the ragged blue denim shorts. His feet were still bare, however, which rather spoiled the effect.

"That's a unique costume, Mr.—?"

"Wainscoting. Two Moons Wainscoting. Thank you, sir."

"Is Two Moons your given name, Mr. Wainscoting?"

"You might say that. It was given to me when I was a small boy. My father took me across the channel to St. Vincent when I was eleven years old. When I returned my

friends asked me what I had seen over there. 'St. Vincent has a moon, too,' I told them. And I've been called Two Moons ever since."

"It's a perfect name for an alectryomancer."

"I've always regarded it highly. And now . . ." Two Moons tethered the Whitehackle cross to a stake in the clearing with a piece of brown twine, and proceeded to draw a large circle around him with a pointed stick.

"The ancient Greeks," I said, to reveal to the man that I knew a few things about alectryomancy, "always described the circle on the ground *prior* to tethering the gamecock in the center."

"Yes," he agreed. "But that isn't the way we do it in the West Indies. Every island race has its own peculiarities. Of course, I can see some merit in describing the circle first, but on the other hand, it is possible that a portion of the circle will be rubbed out inadvertently when reentering it to tether the cock. I have tried both methods, and in all probability I shall use the Greek method again some time in the future. But the system employed doesn't affect the reading, or so I have learned through experience."

"You could get into an argument on that statement."

"You can have an argument on anything pertaining to alectryomancy," Two Moons said cheerfully, and he began to draw the letters of the alphabet in a clockwise direction about the outer perimeter of the circle. He apparently took considerable pride in his work, drawing large capital letters with a pointed stick, rubbing them out again when they didn't come up to his high standards, and doing them over again. He measured the distances between each letter, using his stick as a ruler, and found it necessary to re-draw the S and T because they were too close together.

"Now," he said when he was finished, "the hard part is over. What is your birth-date, Mr. Waxman?"

"January 2, 1919."

"You'll have to speak a trifle louder, Mr. Waxman," Two Moons said apologetically. "My old rooster's getting deaf, and I don't believe he heard you."

I repeated my birthday loudly, enunciating carefully for the rooster's benefit.

Two Moons walked counterclockwise about the circle, dropping a grain of corn in the exact center of each letter, and then sat down beside me. He signaled the gamecock with his pointed stick, and the bird crowed, wheeled about, and pecked up the grain of corn on the letter M. Two Moons wrote M on the ground, and followed it with the O, R, and T as the chicken pecked up each grain. After eating the fourth grain of corn, the rooster returned to the center of the circle, leaned wearily against the stake, and hung his head down to the

ground. We waited, but it was evident from the apathy of the chicken that he was through.

"Maybe he isn't hungry?"

"We'll soon find out." Two Moons Wainscoting untied the cord from the rooster's left leg, and carried him out of the circle. He scattered a few grains of corn, released the cock, and the bird scratched and gobbled down the food as if it were famished.

"He was hungry, all right, Mr. Waxman. Your reading is complete. M.O.R.T." Two Moons muttered, savoring each letter with half-closed eyes. "Mort. Is your middle name Mort, by any chance?"

"Harry Waxman, only. I dropped my middle name when I became a writer, but it wasn't Mort."

"Any relatives named Mort?"

"No." I thought carefully. "No, none at all."

"That's too bad." Two Moons shook his head. "I had hoped—"

"Hoped what?"

"That Mort didn't mean what I knew in my heart it meant." He thumped his breast with a closed fist. "*Mort* is a French word meaning death, Mr. Waxman."

"So? How does it apply to me? I'm not a Frenchman; I'm an American. If the rooster's predicting anything for me, he should do so in English."

"He doesn't know any English," Two Moons explained patiently. "I bought the chicken in Martinique, after my last rooster died. All he knows is French. On difficult readings I often have to consult a French-English dictionary—"

"Maybe he was going to write 'MORTGAGE'?" I broke in.

"I sympathize with you, Mr. Waxman." Two Moons shook his head, dislodging his dirty turban. "But in alectryomancy we can go only by what the gamecock does write, not by what he does not."

"Let's try another reading."

"Another time, perhaps. It's a great strain on my chicken, making predictions, and I only allow him to make one a day."

"Tomorrow, then," I said, getting to my feet.

"Perhaps tomorrow." He agreed reluctantly.

I took my wallet out of my hip pocket. "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing." The alectryomancer spread his arms wide, palms up, and shrugged. "I would appreciate it, however, if you autographed my copy of your pamphlet, *Cockfighting in the Zone of Interior.*"

I tapped my shirt pocket. "When I come up tomorrow. I didn't bring my fountain pen with me today—"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Waxman," Two Moons said reasonably. "In view of the prediction, I would prefer to have the autograph today. If you'll wait a minute, I have a ballpoint pen inside the house . . ."

I slept fitfully that night, but I had slept fitfully every night of the

three months I had been on Bequia. No one had informed me of the fierceness of the sand flies and mosquitoes on Princess Margaret Beach and I had neglected to purchase a mosquito bar before departing Trinidad. But between waking and sleeping, the prediction of the Whitehackle cross gave me something to think about. I was far from satisfied with Two Moon's interpretation of the word "mort".

It was too pat. And yet, no other meaning suggested itself to me. Toward two A.M. I was reduced to considering M.O.R.T. as initials standing for something else. During the war I used to get letters from a girl in California with S.W.A.K. written across the back of the envelope. This meant "Sealed With A Kiss". When this piece of tripe crossed my mind I cursed myself for a fool, downed three quick tumblers of Mount Gay rum, and slept soundly until dawn.

By eight-thirty A.M. I was on the mountain trail to Two Moon's metal residence. Halfway up the mountain I stopped for breath and a slow cigarette, and almost changed my mind about obtaining a second reading. Curiosity got the better of my judgment and I climbed on. When I topped the last rise to the clearing, Two Moons was sitting cross-legged in the sunlight before his shack, humming happily, and plaiting a basket out of green palm leaves. He dropped his lower jaw the moment he saw me, and his yellow eyes popped in their sockets.

"Why, it's Mr. Waxman!" He said with genuine astonishment. "I didn't expect you this morning!"

"You needn't act so surprised. I said I'd be back this morning."

"I apologize for my astonishment. But your case was remarkably similar to a reading I gave a student at Oxford, and I—"

"You attended Oxford?" It was my turn to be surprised.

"For a year and a half only," Two Moons admitted modestly. "I was putting myself through Oxford by practicing alectryomancy in the West End. I had a poor but steady clientele, actors, actresses, producers, and two or three dozen playwrights."

"I fail to see how an Oxford man could end up on Bequia," I said, looking at the alectryomancer with new respect.

"An English Dom did it," Two Moons said sorrowfully.

"Got mixed up with a woman?"

"No, sir. Not a woman, a Dom. A truly beautiful gamefowl, the English Dom. Pure white, with a yellow bill and feet. I bought the rooster in Sussex, and before utilizing his services for my clients, I had him make a practice prediction for me. Without hesitating the Dom pecked out BEQUIA. I ate the fowl for supper, packed my belongings, and left on the next ship leaving England for Barbados. I've been on Bequia ever since, thirty-two years in October."

"At any rate," I said, moved by the simple story, "one of your predictions came true."

"They all come true."

"We'll see. How about my second reading?"

"Yes, sir." Two Moons held out his right hand. "That will be ten dollars, in advance."

"Very well." I parted with a brown B.W.I. ten-dollar bill. "Bring on your French-pecking rooster."

The rigmarole was unchanged from the day before. Two Moons Wainscoting changed from ragged blue denim shorts into his homemade costume and turban, tethered the gamecock, and drew the circle and block-letter alphabet as carefully as he had done for my first reading. He signaled with the pointed stick and the idiotic rooster pecked M, O, R, T and stopped. After crowing half-heartedly, the bird leaned against the stake and hung his head down, bill touching the ground. I was unable to understand how the mere pecking up of four lousy grains of corn could make the chicken so tired.

"Let's wait a bit, Two Moons." I cleared my dry throat. "Maybe he'll continue."

"As you wish, Mr. Waxman."

The minutes ticked away. The sun was hot. The back of my neck stung with prickly heat. Mango flies and tiny gnats buzzed and feinted about my perspiring face, but I waited. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, and the stupid rooster still remained immobilized in the center of the circle.

"*Mort* comes to us all, in time," Two Moons said pityingly.

"A truth that can't be denied," I agreed, getting to my feet and stretching. "Well, thanks for the prediction, Mr. Wainscoting. But it's a hot day and I'm going for a swim." I started down the trail, my hands balled into fists inside the pockets of my khaki shorts.

"Watch out for barracuda!" Two Moons shouted after me. "And dangerous cross currents."

"Thanks!" I called back drily.

I didn't go swimming. I didn't do anything. I brooded, sitting in the tiny living room of my screenless cottage, staring out the window at the bright blue, cheerful waters of the bay. The first *mort* wasn't so bad, but when it came to two *morts* I was forced to do a little quiet thinking. Like all Americans, I laugh at superstition. Ha, ha! The pinch of salt, tossed carelessly over the left shoulder. A needless precaution, but I did it all the time. Did I ever place a hat upon a bed? Never. Why not? Well, just because, that's why. Did I ever walk under a ladder? No, of course not. A can of paint might cover one from above; that was prudence, not superstition. I wasn't really superstitious. Not really. But that gamecock had been so positive . . . !

Three days later I fired my maid. The woman refused to taste my food, claiming falsely that she

didn't like canned pork-and-beans. I issued an ultimatum, and when she still flatly refused to eat a bite, and prevent me from being poisoned, I gave her the sack, and tossed the beans into the bay.

My life became more complicated without anyone else around, but I preferred to be alone. I now had to make up the list of foodstuffs to send to St. Vincent, and I had to meet the *M.V. Madinina* when it steamed into the harbor on Friday to get them. But I didn't mind the activity. I wasn't hungry either, and the little I did eat was better prepared by myself. I worried, however. A bad tin of corned beef, a can of sour condensed milk, and pouf! *Mort.* I drank a lot of Mount Gay rum, and a little water.

Three weeks following my second reading, I paid my third visit to Two Moons Wainscoting. I was unable to stand the fear and suspense any longer. I hadn't shaved for several days. Suppose I had cut myself with a rusty razor blade? Where could I get a tetanus shot on Bequia? My sleep was no longer fitful; I couldn't sleep at all. Three full inches had disappeared from my waistline.

"Two Moons," I said anxiously, as soon as I entered his clearing, "I've got to have another reading."

"I've been expecting you, Mr. Waxman," Two Moons said soothingly. "That is, I've been expecting word concerning you, but I must turn down your request for a third reading. This is not an arbitrary decision. The life of an alectryomancer on Bequia isn't an easy one, and I would welcome another ten-dollar bill, but I am not totally lacking in compassion, so I must refuse."

"I'll give you twenty dollars—"

Two Moons held up a hand to silence me. "Please, Mr. Waxman. This isn't a question of money! Let me summarize: you have had now two flat predictions, both of them identical. *Mort!* An ugly word, whether in French or English, but *mort* all the same. Suppose, on a third prediction, my gamecock were to peck out W.E.D.S. or a simple F.R.I.? Do you see the implication? You're a writer, Mr. Waxman, and do not lack imagination. A gamecock is incapable of telling a falsehood, and if my rooster pecked an F.R.I.—which he could do in all innocence—this is the abbreviation for Friday. Today is Tuesday. How would you feel tomorrow, on Wednesday? And then Thursday? The next day would be Friday, and Friday would be the day for what? *Mort!*" He pointed his finger at my chest and shook his head.

I shuddered as the pit of my stomach chilled. "But—"

"Please, Mr. Waxman. I cannot risk another reading. An alectryomancer has a conscience, just like everyone else, and I would suffer along with you. I must refuse your request for a third reading. I cannot; I will not do it!"

"I'm a young man," I croaked hoarsely, "and I'm not ready to die. I won't even be forty until my next birthday."

"There's an alternative." Two Moons pursed his lips and peered at me intently. "But I hesitate to mention it to a man with so little faith."

"Mention it," I said sharply. "By all means, mention it."

"You are cognizant of the West Indian *obeah?"*

"I think so. It's a spell or charm of some kind, isn't it?"

"In a way, yes. There are all kinds of *obeahs;* they can be made for good or evil, in the same manner African ju-jus are made for good or evil. Unfortunately, many West Indians have a vindictive character, and often cast about for a means of vengeance for a very small grievance. This deplorable character trait, I am happy to state, is not a universal West Indian—"

"I'm not interested in the character traits of the average West Indian. I have problems of my own."

"To be sure. To shorten the rather interesting story, I possess an *obeah* that will ward off *mort* for an indefinite period."

"Let me take a look at it."

"Not so fast. Like every spell or charm or ju-ju, an *obeah* has a condition attached."

"What are the conditions?"

"Condition." He held up a long forefinger. "Singular, Mr. Waxman. A simple condition, but a condition nevertheless. Belief. Blind, unquestioning belief. So long as you believe in the *obeah* you shall have life. Not everlasting life, as promised by your optimistic Christian *obeahs,* but life for a reasonable period. The Grenadian who fashioned this *obeah* lived to be one hundred and ten."

"That's a long time."

"A very long time."

"I believe," I said desperately. "Give me the *obeah!"*

"You're an impulsive young man, Mr. Waxman. This is a valuable *obeah,* and before I can give it to you I must test your belief. The *obeah* has a price of seventy-five dollars."

I passed the test. Happier than I had been in days, I ran lightly down the mountain trail, a small leather sack tied around my neck. The sack was securely fastened with a square knot in the rawhide thong at the back of my neck, and from time to time I fingered the knot to make certain it wouldn't slip.

Night fell. I sat in my tiny living room. The pale light of my kerosene lamp—there isn't any electricity on Bequia—made my shadow dance on the wall like a boxer. The wind was responsible for my flickering shadow, but I felt like a boxer, fighting the deadly logic of the gamecock's prediction. I clutched the sack at my neck, feeling the strange objects inside through the leather, wondering what in the devil they were. Two

Moons had warned me not to look inside—"Never look a gift horse in the mouth"—were his exact words, but I was curious all the same. If I stopped believing in the *obeah, mort* could strike suddenly at any moment. The wisdom of Two Moons Wainscoting, in denying me a third prediction, was the only bright spot in my thinking. But even with the *obeah* in my possession I couldn't live forever . . .

Not that I had any particular reason to go on living. I wasn't happy, and never had been. I was single, no dependents, no real purpose in life—really, except for writing an occasional novel or short story. But I wanted to hang on, if for no other reason than to see what would happen next. I had lost all desire to write an article on alectryomancy . . .

I felt the objects inside the *obeah* with my fingers. What were they? I jerked my hand away quickly. What if my fingers recognized one or more of the objects inside the leather sack? How could I go on believing in the efficacy of the *obeah,* if I once found out what the sack contained? A nasty situation to be in, all the way around.

In the daytime, life wasn't so bad. The bright sunlight chased away the problems of the night. But everything I did, which wasn't much, was done judiciously. I still swam every day, but never ventured more than a few yards from the shore, fearing the rip tides and cross currents. I continued to take daily hikes, but I walked slowly, like an old man with brittle bones. And I carried a cane. Most of the time I sat quietly on the narrow front porch of my cottage drinking rum-and-water. Sometimes, I wished that *mort* would come to me in the night, in my sleep, so that it would be all over and done with.

After a few lonely evenings I began to go to the hotel at night, picking my way along the beach path, playing my flashlight on every shadow before taking another step. There wasn't any electricity at the hotel either, but the porch was lighted by Coleman lanterns, and they didn't cast shadows . . .

Just a few short hours ago I was sitting at a table on the hotel verandah, staring glumly into my glass, when Bob Corbett sat down across from me. One quick glance at his red, serious face and orange moustache, and I shook my head.

"No nattering tonight, Bob," I said firmly. "I'm not up to it."

Bob Corbett is a British civil servant who makes periodic trips to the various islands looking for fungus or something, but the Government maintains a house for him on Bequia. Like many of the bored civil servants posted to the Windward Islands for three years, Bob has become addicted to the game of nattering. Nattering is a game where two persons hurl insults at

each other until one of them gets angry enough to fight. During the early years of my writing career I had served time as a desk clerk at a New York hotel for almost two years, and as a consequence, I had bested Bob Corbett in every nattering session he started. In the last session we played, Bob had taken a swing at me with an empty Black & White bottle.

"No nattering," Bob agreed readily, signaling the barmaid to refill our glasses. "I really came over to make amends. I've been standing at the bar for almost an hour without a sign of recognition from you, and if you want an apology you can have it. But I really didn't hit you with that bottle—"

"I'm sorry, Bob. I didn't cut you; I just didn't see you," I apologized. All at once, I felt an overwhelming desire to confide in Bob Corbett, and I yielded impulsively to the desire. The dark thoughts had been bottled up inside me too long. "Listen, Bob," I began, "did you ever hear of alectryomancy?" And I unfolded the whole story.

"Ho-ho-ho!" Bob laughed, when I had finished. "You've been had, old man!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Had! Taken! Bilked! And you're a New Yorker, too. That's what makes it so funny!" Another string of bubbling ho-ho-hos followed, and I drummed my fingers on the table impatiently.

"Old Two Moons is a notorious character in the islands," Bob said at last, wiping his streaming eyes with the back of a freckled hand. "This old faker and his trained rooster have caused I don't know how many complaints to the Administrator on St. Vincent from irate tourists. His rooster, you see, is trained to peck out the word 'mort'! And the convincing mumbo-jumbo that Two Moons puts with it has sucked you in."

"I don't believe it. I'd like to but I can't."

"I'll prove it to you," Bob said earnestly, leaning across the table. "After the rooster pecked the four grains of corn, ostensibly spelling 'mort', he hung his head down. Right?"

"Right."

"Following this, didn't Two Moons remove the chicken from the circle and feed him some more corn? And didn't the rooster scratch it up and eat it?"

"Of course. That's what made the reading so effective."

"No. It proves only that the rooster is trained. Think a bit, man. To train animals of any kind, you must always reward them after they do their trick. And the only reward an animal recognizes is food! A trained rooster isn't any different from a trained bear that's been given a bottle of beer for doing a dance. A bloke I knew in Newfoundland had a bloody wolf chained in his garage, and one—"

I left the table abruptly, not wait-

ing to find out about the bloody wolf in Newfoundland, and flashing my torch before me, ran all of the way home along the beach path. As soon as my kerosene lamp was lighted, I untied the thong at the back of my neck, and dumped the contents of the leather sack on the dining table. Inventory: one plastic toothpick (red); one small, round obsidian pebble; two withered jackfish eyes; one dried chameleon tail, approximately three inches long; one red checker; three battered and badly bent Coca-Cola caps; one chicken feather (yellow); six assorted, unidentifiable small dried bones, and one brass disc entitling the bearer to a ten-cent beer at Freddy Ming's Cafe, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad.

A blind red film burning my eyes, I stared stupidly at the contents of the *obeah,* and cursed Two Moons Wainscoting aloud for five full minutes. Then I quickly scooped the objects into the leather sack, went outside, and tossed the thing into the sea. The buoyant sack floated on the surface, bobbing up and down, drifting away from shore on the outgoing tide. A great idea struck me. I would recover the *obeah* from the sea, pay a return visit to Two Moon's establishment, and feed him each object in the leather bag, one at a time.

This idea delighted me so much, I kicked off my sandals, on impulse, and dived into the sea. I soon found, with mounting apprehension, that in spite of all the strokes I was taking, I wasn't making any headway. It wasn't until then that I recalled that the natives, skilled as they are with small sailboats, never venture out in fishing boats after dark, nor will they swim after dark, not even in the bay. I was trapped in a riptide. Though I panicked, I did remember someone saying that the only way to get out of such a situation was to head for shore at a diagonal.

I've tried the diagonal business, but it hasn't worked. And so like a drowning man — which I am — clutching at a straw, I've continued swimming out to sea, trying to get my hands on that *obeah.* It's my only hope. But the currents keep carrying it just beyond my grasp. My strokes are getting much weaker now, it seems, and I'm no closer to getting my fingers on the *obeah* than I was in the beginning. The night is so black I don't even know where land is anymore. The tiny, scattered lights of Bequia have been extinguished for some time, and the night is so dark I can't even make out the mass of St. Vincent. There are barracuda out here in the deep water, and didn't Two Moons tell me to watch out for barracuda?

"Obeah! I believe in you! I believe, I believe, I believe! I—"

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WHY

Don't You Do Something

? ? ?

by Donald Honig

An announcement that auditors are coming, I've been told, suffices to disturb the average embezzler who is usually tall, blond, and—above all—nervous. He invariably quakes, may drink his ink eradicator or its equivalent—or might merely say he needed ready cash to make a more worthwhile individual of himself.

No one would have thought that life was so tough for Mike Redmond. He owned the classiest cabaret in town, was married to a beautiful blonde, lived in a commodious ranch-style home in a fashionable suburb, and owned two cars. So Mike was envied by everyone, but, like most envied men, his life wasn't everything it appeared to be. For one thing, there was always tension and unspoken (lately it was being more and more articulate) antipathy between him and Edna. Like many marriages, their marriage had not been based wholly on love to begin with; they had merely been two attractive, intensely physical human beings who had married almost out of a dire passionate necessity. But that had been seven years ago and their marriage—it was childless—was now at times painfully difficult.

But more irritating (and puzzling) to Mike than his wife's mercurial affection, was the fact that the Blue Diamond cabaret was not making the money it should; in fact there were months when, despite the crowded bar and booths and the brisk lunchtime trade, the books recorded a definite loss. This was another source of tension between Mike and Edna. The splashes of red ink caused her to accuse him of mismanagement, stupidity and indifference. In fact this gradually became their principal source of dispute.

"If you would let me down there once in awhile," Edna would begin.

Mike would shake his head. "That's no place for you. It's a cabaret to some people, a place for fun and social relaxation; but to us it's a business."

Edna snorted. "Well what do you think I want to go down there for?

It's about time you realized that it's not just a social club, but a business too, and put your thumb in the leak. It's bleeding you dry."

Despite every indication to the contrary, Mike still loved his wife, which was probably why he tolerated all the abuse and criticism. But he saw her drifting away . . . and for once her criticism was justified; the Blue Diamond *was* losing money . . . and even when there were profits, they were not what one would have reasonably expected them to be.

Dick Raydon, Mike's flashy young general manager (they said about Dick that he was sharp enough to cut your throat just by looking at you) suggested that there might be a leak in the till. So Mike hired a man from a private detective's office to come and sit at the bar Fridays and Saturdays and unobtrusively observe the bartenders. After a few weeks the report was, "They clip you here and there, but not enough to sink the ship." Nevertheless, Mike fired the bartenders, hired others . . . but the puzzling deficits continued to mount.

"How much do you trust Emil?" Dick asked Mike one night. Emil was the Blue Diamond's accountant, a small stocky German who came once every few weeks to take care of the books.

"It's getting so," Mike said, "that I don't trust anyone anymore."

"Not even old me?" Dick asked, flashing his white, ingratiating smile.

"Not even myself," Mike said somberly, gazing at his desk. "Somebody around here is getting rich on me."

"Why couldn't it be Emil? He's the one who does the books and comes up with the figures. And you do let him handle a lot of your cash, don't you?"

"He does do some buying," Mike said thoughtfully. "He's a strange fish. He lives all by himself. What would he want with the money?"

"To keep him company maybe," Dick said.

Mike settled back in his swivel chair, swinging lightly to and fro. "Let's see," he said pensively. "There's the bartenders, the chef, the waiters, the porter."

"Maybe somebody is in cahoots with somebody else."

"That's possible. Now you just tell me who."

Mike drove home that afternoon, his mind projecting face after face across its screen, scrutinizing and interrogating mentally each one, assorting them into two columns—the probables and the improbables.

When he drove into the driveway, he saw Edna standing in front of the door, glaring at him. He parked and got out, slamming the door behind him, walking across the lawn towards her.

"I've been waiting for you," she said sourly, her arms crossed, her face fixed in anger.

"I'm sure it isn't to give me a welcome home kiss," he said.

"Hardly. Listen, what's the idea of canceling out my charge account at Burton's? I went there today and picked out a couple of dresses and then the clerk told me . . ."

"I know what she told you. The fact is . . . and you ought to know this . . . we simply can't afford that kind of extravagance anymore."

Her arms unfolded and her hands went to her hips. "Why not?" she demanded.

"I'll draw you a diagram. And while we're on it, I might as well tell you now, if this keeps up we're going to have to sell one of the cars."

Edna was stunned. "Sell one of the cars?"

"That's right." He started to go in the house, but she stopped him.

"Just a minute. I don't like this, Mike, I don't like it one bit. If you think I'm going to wait until you've gone and pauperized us . . ."

"At this rate you won't have to wait long."

"Well why don't you *do something?"* she demanded.

Those words burned in his mind that night. He came back to the Diamond and sat in his office, pondering. If this kept up much longer he would lose the place, and with it Edna. He could live without the Blue Diamond, he was getting tired of the cabaret business anyway. But there was more than that involved now. Somebody was making a fool out of him. And in more than one place, too—for Edna was already disappearing in the evenings; he would call her several times and she would not be home. Her explanation, when he got home and questioned her, would be: "I went to the movies." or, "I didn't feel like answering the phone." One of these night she would go out and not come back, he knew . . . unless he did something, did it quickly and decisively.

A few days later Emil came to do the books. Mike had called him up and told him to come Sunday morning (the Diamond did not open on Sundays) because he wanted to go over the books very carefully with him. On Sunday morning Mike was waiting. At nine o'clock he heard Emil opening the front door, heard him close it and come walking in. The short, portly bookkeeper came into the office. Emil was in his fifties. He was a reticent man, quite shy. He sat down opposite Mike, his briefcase in his lap.

"What do you suggest we do about the deficits, Emil?" Mike asked.

The bookkeeper stared at him for a moment, intently from behind silver-rimmed spectacles. "I don't know what to suggest," he said in his low, diffident, slightly accented voice.

"We're doing the business, you

know that. The place is packed on week ends. The lunch trade is good. But where is the money? It's being drained out slow but sure. It's not only wrecking me here but home too. You know how Edna is. She's an awfully expensive ornament to have."

Emil smiled appreciatively. "She's a very beautiful woman."

"With beautiful tastes. Now, I've come up with an idea. I realize now that I've been rather haphazard in certain things around here. For instance we don't keep a careful enough inventory of things."

"Isn't Dick supposed to take care of that?"

"He does the best he can, but he isn't here every night. And anyway, I'm tired of delegating responsibilities to others. Maybe that's been the whole trouble. No matter how honest a man might be, there's still always a certain unavoidable laxness when it comes to tending to someone else's property. I'm going to shoulder as much of the responsibility as I can from now on. I want you to come with me and take a complete inventory."

"Now?" Emil asked.

"Right now."

They began behind the bar, counting every bottle there, Mike crouching about and calling them off to Emil. Then they went down the cellar and took stock of every case of liquor, Emil walking behind with a pad, making a notation of everything. Then they went back upstairs, put on their coats, and went into the refrigerator to check the quantities of frozen meat there.

Mike opened the heavy door and let Emil in first, then stepped in after him. Suddenly, inexplicably, the door slammed shut, clicking with a deadliness. They both whirled around. Emil blanched.

"Of course," he said, "you put it on the safety catch. It didn't lock, did it?"

Mike stared at the door, then tried it, pulling back hard on it. It would not budge.

"Good God in heaven!" Emil exclaimed, rushing to the door, with his slight strength pulling on the handle, his face turning redder and redder. He gave up finally, turning and confronting Mike. "What have you done?" he asked tragically.

Mike's face was contorted. "I don't know," he said abstractedly, shaking his head. He tried the door again, then let go.

"We'll freeze to death in here," Emil said. "When will someone come?"

"Not till tomorrow morning," Mike said. He looked around, The refrigerator was not very large. Sides of beef hung around them, and there were stacks of steaks and chickens. "Freeze hell," Mike said. "We'll suffocate long before that." He went to the door and began shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Do you think someone might

be able to hear from outside?" Emil asked, his fingers clasped together.

"I doubt it," Mike said. "But it's our only hope."

For a while they stood by the door and shouted, kicking and pounding upon it. Then they stopped, stared at each other. They moved away from the door.

"But certainly someone will come," Emil said.

"Who?" Mike asked forlornly.

"Doesn't the porter come in Sunday mornings?"

"I told him not to come today because I didn't want him to see what we were doing."

"But surely Edna will wonder why . . ."

"She won't even give it a thought. How about you—does anyone know you're here?"

"You know me," Emil said sadly. "I have no one."

"This is a fine fix," Mike said angrily.

They were beginning to feel the cold now. Emil wrapped his coat more snugly around himself, buttoning up the collar.

"Isn't there some way to shut off the cold?" he asked.

"No," Mike said. "It's all attached from the outside."

"Good God," Emil said. For a moment he looked as if he would faint. He sat down on the floor, leaning against the wall, his small body shivering badly, as though he had delirium tremens. Mike stood against the door, gazing blankly at the floor.

"We should have brought a bottle in here with us," he said.

"What good would that do?" Emil said bitterly, looking around. "It's incredible," he said, burying his head in his hands.

Mike turned up his collar. "When a man has bad luck," he said, "it goes all the way."

"Which will come first do you think," Emil's buried head asked, "the freezing or the suffocation?"

"The suffocation probably. How much air do you think is in here to begin with?" Mike lit a cigarette.

"Won't that burn up the oxygen more quickly?" Emil asked.

"What the hell is the difference?" Mike said irascibly.

"Can't we smash the door somehow?"

"Not that door. It was built not to be smashed."

"This is a tomb then, a frozen tomb," Emil said tragically.

Mike threw his cigarette down and crushed it with his shoe. "I'm sorry, Emil. This is my fault. That door . . . I don't know how it . . . I've been so overwrought lately . . . I just don't know . . ." He covered his face with his hand and sat down opposite Emil. For a long while they did not speak, sitting there opposite each other, each concerned with his own thoughts. The cold was hard in their bones now.

"Mike?" Emil said at last. Mike

raised his head, looked across at him. "Do you find it harder to breathe?" Mike shrugged. "I do," Emil said. "I can feel it. It's getting . . . getting close in here."

"Don't talk about it," Mike said sharply.

"But I want to talk. I can't stand to think about it." Emil glared around, his eyes wild for a moment, then filling with piteous fear. "When I stop to think, I think about no one missing me. They won't even know I'm gone. My room will stay empty for days until someone at last realizes: He is gone; he hasn't been here for days. I don't want to die like that, Mike. To die unmourned . . . it's as if you have never lived."

"I'm sorry, Emil."

Emil sighed, nodding.

Mike shook his head. "The things you reflect upon at a time like this, how strange. All I can think of are the wrongs I've done, all the petty, unimportant things. I ran away from home once and my parents almost went out of their minds with concern. And another time, I struck my brother for no reason at all. I thought I'd have forgotten those things long ago. I haven't been such a wrong kind of person; yet these things keep striking at me now. Do you remember Nick, the bartender I fired. He pleaded with me for his job. He had a wife and five children, he said. But I was firing everybody then. I was looking for the culprit, and lacking that I chose scapegoats. So I fired him."

Emil was watching him, his face brooding. "I can understand. I haven't been a religious man, but I feel like making my own confession now. You need not have fired Nick, or any of the others. I know why you fired them. It was wrong; it was my fault."

"What do you mean?"

"I was the one who had the hand in your money, Mike," Emil said, leveling a straight, steady gaze across at Mike.

"You?"

Emil shut his eyes for a moment, nodding sadly. "I took your money."

"You, Emil?"

"Don't ask me why. You had so much, it seemed to me. You had this place, and you had a beautiful wife. It didn't seem just to me. I didn't need the money. What did it buy for me?"

"I don't believe you, Emil."

"Why not? Why should a dying man tell a lie?"

"But how did you do it?"

Emil smiled, ironically. "You said yourself how you overdid delegating responsibility to others. You let me have the key. When the place was closed, I would come back and take out cases of liquor and sell them. And when you let me buy, I bought less and charged you the full amount. A man in my profession knows so many unscrupulous ways. And the irony of it is

that no one ever suspects the man who keeps the books. And why is that? Because the man who keeps the books is a man like myself, dull and dreary and no one ever suspects a thief to be such a man."

"You were the last person I suspected."

"There. Do you see?"

"I could send you to jail, Emil."

Emil laughed, bitterly. "How I wish you would. How I wish you could Mike."

Suddenly Mike stood up, suddenly angry and alert. "So you've been stealing from me. So you're a thief. Emil Drukman, my bookkeeper, the man I trusted above all others . . . you've been stealing from me."

"Regretfully, I admit that."

A sardonic smile appeared on Mike's lips. "You want to go to jail? Well maybe now I can accommodate you." Mike reached high up onto a shelf, bringing down a small tape recorder that had been turning slowly, inexorably. He clicked it off, turned and showed it to Emil.

"Thank you, Emil," he said.

Emil looked up at him, intrigued. "That's most interesting," he said. "But how do you propose to employ it –other than posthumously?"

"Do you think I've been *that* stupid, Emil?"

"You mean this has all been a trick?" Emil asked, a hardness in his voice.

"Call it what you will."

"Then all of your shouting, your remorse, all that was theatrics?"

Mike turned to the door. "I'm glad you spoke up when you did. There's not much time left in here."

"How are you going to open that door?"

"I'm not. There's someone out there waiting for me to call."

Emil's eyes blazed furiously. "Who?" he asked.

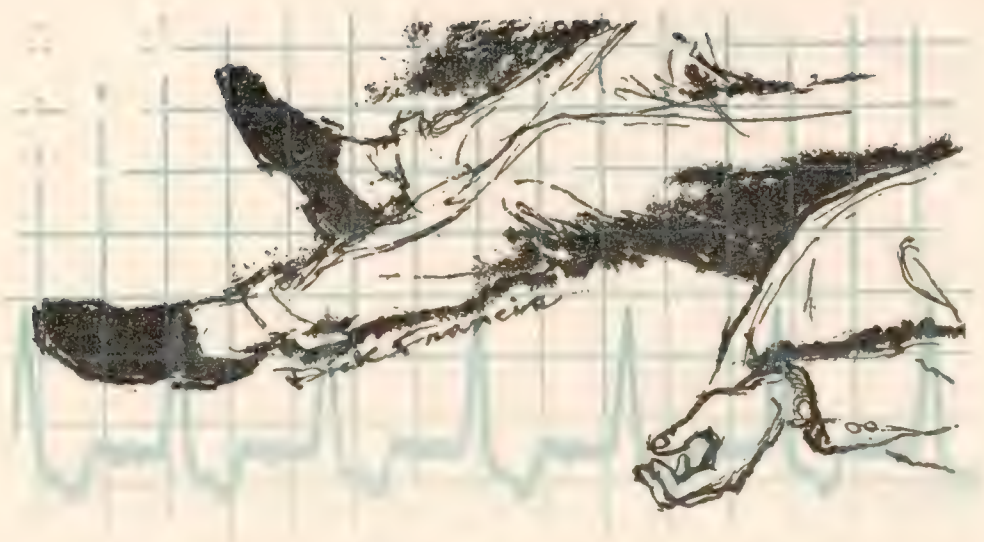
"Dick Raydon. He's been in the place the whole time."

Emil's eyebrows lifted. "Dick? Do you expect him to open that door? You expect . . ."

"Why not?"

"My God, you have been a fool. Do you mean to say you've been blind to that too—to Dick and your beautiful Edna?"

Mike looked at him quizzically, suspiciously, turning slowly to the door. He called Dick's name. Then shouted it, louder and louder. Then he dropped the tape recorder to the floor and pounded the door with both hands, screaming Dick's name at the top of his lungs which he felt beginning to fill with that close, stagnant air that was around him now like an invisible, tightening noose.



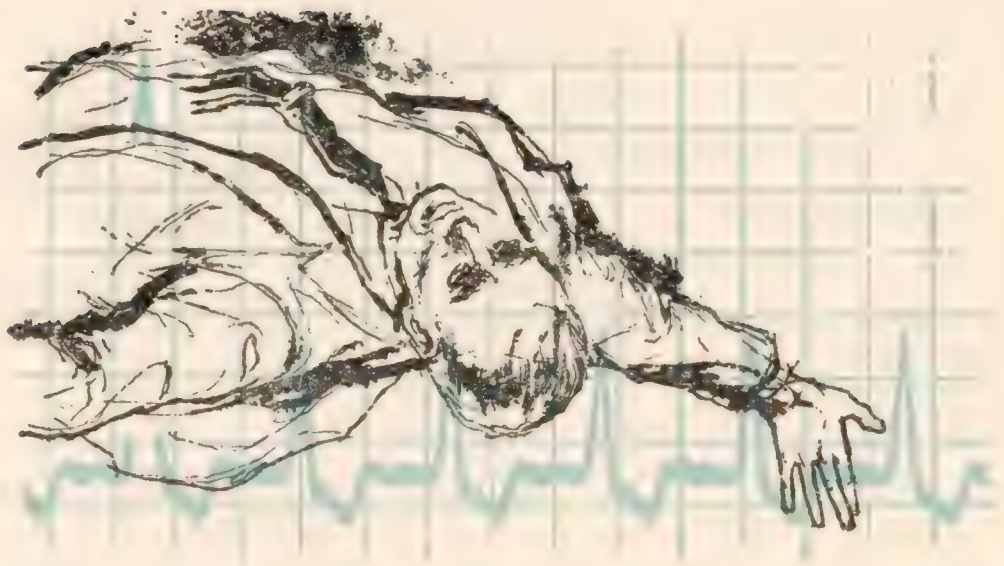
DEATH BY CALCULATION

by Donald Martin

Should you ever find a trout in your milk, a sage once pointed out, you might understandably assume that the milk someplace along the line, between the cow and you, had been tampered with—diluted, that is. But in our story, we have much more than circumstantial evidence. In addition to the trout in the milk, there is a most vehement confession by an affable, articulate "murderer."

LIEUTENANT COSTA was certain he had caught a murderer, and it was a good thing, too, because the public (in their peculiar, inexplicable way) had been rather indignant about the murder of old George Grimes the grocer who had been found dead in the room he occupied behind his store, his head crushed by an object the police said had been a length of pipe and which they said they had recovered from a sewer several blocks away.

As a rule, Costa did not like circumstantial evidence, but for once he was grateful for it, for the DA wanted a murderer—or, more explicitly, a conviction. Eighteen year-old Willie Bradford, who lived a block away from the grocery store, had been caught in its net—or, more pointedly, its noose. A fountain pen belonging to the youth (which he readily admitted was



his) had been found next to the body. Willie had explained its presence there by saying that a few days before he had gone into the back room with Mr. Grimes to help him compose a letter to Mr. Grimes' family in Scotland. But the letter had never been received, the police learned from the family in Scotland.

There had been no forced entry, so whoever had murdered the old man had been allowed into the closed store without suspicion. Willie admitted being quite friendly with the old man. But was it genuine friendship? Lieutenant Costa asked. Didn't Willie's family owe a bill of nearly forty dollars to Mr. Grimes? Hadn't there been a rather severe argument between Willie's alcoholic father and the grocer just a few days before the murder, with the grocer threatening to sue Mr. Bradford for the money? Hadn't Willie begged Mr. Grimes not to do it, then threatened him if he did? Yes, Willie said. But it had been said first in anger and then as braggadocio, because two of his friends had been there. But it had been said. And now a man was dead. It never pays to threaten anyone's life, Costa told Willie, because it might just happen that that person might die.

"You're hammering nails into my coffin!" Willie had screamed at Costa.

"Maybe, maybe," the lieutenant had snapped back. "But who went and built the damned coffin?"

But the crowning piece of evidence was Willie's inability to explain his whereabouts on the night of the murder.

"I was with a woman," he said.

"What's her name?" Costa asked.

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"It's a matter of honor."

"Where does she live?"

"I can't tell you."

"She's a married woman?"

"Yes. She's very married. If I told you anything there would be another murder for you."

"Why doesn't she come forward?"

"I don't know."

"This has been in all the papers. She surely knows about it."

"She's probably afraid."

"This 'matter of honor,'" Costa said, "might very well cost you your life."

Willie's mouth tightened, his face turning white. "I can't tell," he said.

"You want us to just take your word for it, eh?" Costa said. "If you're doing this much for her, don't you think she ought to do something for you? Your predicament is in every newspaper, all over the city."

"She's afraid to say anything," Willie said.

"And she was the only one who saw you that night?"

"Yes," Willie said.

It was a good story, Costa thought. But it didn't fool anyone. Phantom alibis were pathetic, were desperate, but they melted down before realities.

So Costa was convinced and the commissioner was convinced and so were the newspapers and the public and it looked as if Mr. Grimes would be able to sleep peacefully and avenged in his grave.

But then Harold Glennon walked into the police station. He was tall and quite good-looking, with graying temples, neat wavy hair. He had about him an easy, affable, affluent manner. He spoke quietly, concisely, in a soft, pleasant voice. And they listened, very carefully, to him.

Lieutenant Costa was sitting in his office writing his report on the Grimes case when the door opened and Sergeant Clifford came in. He closed the door quietly and stood before the desk.

"We have a guy out there," Clifford said, "who has just confessed to the Grimes murder."

Costa's eyes came up from his papers, looking at Clifford skeptically for a moment, then falling again as he went on with his writing.

"I know what you're thinking," Clifford said.

"If you know what I'm thinking," Costa said, not missing a stroke with his pen, "why don't you send him where he ought to be sent?"

"Because what he says is interesting."

Costa laid down his pen. He looked at Clifford. "They're all interesting," he said, his voice a trifle short of patience. "Lunatics are always interesting. How many is that that have confessed now? A dozen? Two dozen?"

Clifford didn't smile. He kept looking at Costa. "I think you'd better talk to him."

"Why should I talk to him?" Costa asked.

"He knows more about the murder than we do."

A few minutes later Harold Glennon was ushered into the office. Costa stared at him critically, unimpressed by the man's neat, respectable, responsible, utterly sane appearance, searching for that flaw in him, that tiny flaw of irresponsibility that would explain his confessing to a murder for which Costa had already all but convicted someone.

"All right, Mr. Glennon," Costa said, leaning back from the desk. "The floor is yours."

"I don't understand your skepticism, lieutenant," Glennon said in his quiet, affable voice. "I should think that policemen would be eager to interview confessors of the sin."

"What makes you think I'm not eager, Mr. Glennon?"

"Because you have Willie Bradford caged up, caged up in more ways than one."

"We think he's a murderer."

"Your evidence is rather slight, don't you think?"

"That's for the courts to decide."

"Willie Bradford is innocent of this crime."

"So you say."

"I killed Mr. Grimes, and not with that iron pipe you found a few blocks away. I think you know very well that that could never have been the weapon. Isn't that so?" Glennon prodded.

Costa's face colored. "We never said it was," he said irascibly.

"You implied it rather strongly. And Willie's connection with it, I believe you said, was that he as a plumber's helper had access to precisely that sort of length of pipe. Now I call that deduction in desperation. Anyone, even a spinster, or a child, could get ahold of an instrument like that. But that's neither here nor there, for isn't it true that the murder weapon was a hammer? And that Mr. Grimes was sitting down when he was struck, because the fatal blows were rained upon the top of his head and left indentations upon his skull that only a hammer could leave? And couldn't this have very well been the hammer?" Glennon asked, taking from a small parcel he had been holding, a hammer, laying it before Costa who stared intently at it, as if eager to pick it up but unwilling, stubbornly so.

"You also implied," Glennon went on, "that the murderer had to be a close acquaintance of Mr. Grimes, otherwise why would the old man have let him in after the store was closed? But is that really so? If you were a grocer and a man tapped at your door after hours and asked you to sell him a bottle of milk or a loaf of bread, wouldn't you do it? Mr. Grimes did. He let

me in that night, and although he knew me, I was hardly what you would call a close acquaintance. Does that sound so implausible to you?"

"So you came to buy a loaf of bread, then decided to kill him. Why? Because he overcharged you?" Costa asked sarcastically.

Glennon smiled tolerantly. "I'll tell you why. Several months ago I owned a dog, a beautiful collie named Shep. He was the finest dog in the world. I would let him roam all over the neighborhood because he could be trusted to stay out of mischief and always come home. But one night he didn't come home. A few days later I received a call. Shep had been found dead. He had been poisoned. This most beautiful animal, Lieutenant, proud and faithful and alert, had been maliciously poisoned by someone. How any human being could ever conceive to do such a thing, I could not imagine. But I set out to find that person. It developed that Shep had had a penchant for nosing around Mr. Grime's yard and that the old man had chased him several times, and then finally laid out some poison meat for him."

"How did you find this out?"

"Through Mr. Grimes himself. I narrowed my suspects down to him. I went into his store one day, luring him into a conversation during which I stated an abhorrence for animals, particularly dogs. Emboldened by this, Mr. Grimes slyly admitted what he had done. That sufficed for the moment. But a few weeks later, after having brooded almost incessantly upon this, I went back to him. It was late at night. He had been closed for hours. I tapped on his door and he came out and raised the shade and I asked him to sell me a bottle of milk. I think he remembered me. Anyway, he opened the door. I should say that I did not go there with the intention of murdering him. When I got inside I told him who I was. He immediately became frightened and ordered me out. But I wanted compensation. I demanded a hundred dollars for what he had done. His alternative was, I told him, a good sound thrashing. We went into the back to talk it over. He was quite frightened. He agreed to write me a check. It would be for fifty dollars. I insisted upon my original figure. He began to hem and haw. The more he did, the more furious I became. He then made the remark, 'Do you know how many damned dogs I have killed off like that?'—the implication being that I was the first to demand amends from him and that it was quite unreasonable of me. This remark seemed to completely dement me. I looked around, saw the hammer, picked it up and in an uncontrollable rage —the rest you know."

"And this is the hammer?" Costa asked.

"Yes."

"And you want me to believe this story?"

"You have no choice but to believe it."

"Assuming that it's true, do you know what will happen to you?" Costa asked.

"I'm quite aware."

"Then why did you come in?"

"It may or may not interest you, but you have an innocent boy sitting in a cell praying away his life," Glennon said sharply.

"Why didn't anyone see you leaving the store?"

"Because no one was there. It was late at night."

"How late?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Where did you go when you left?"

"I don't remember. I don't remember anything from the time I began hitting him to the time I woke up in my own room the next morning."

"You just walked around holding that hammer in your hand?"

"I assume I put it in my pocket."

"How many times did you hit the old man?"

"About six or eight times."

"Did he die immediately?"

"That I don't know. I left him lying on the floor."

"When you woke up the next morning, didn't you feel any remorse? Didn't you rush to tell someone, or to find out how the old man was?"

"No, I didn't feel any remorse, frankly, nor did I seek to find out about the old man—it was already in the papers that he had been found dead."

"You didn't tell this to anyone?"

"Of course not."

Costa sat back in his chair, contemplating Glennon's calm, perfectly composed face. The lieutenant sighed. "All right, Mr. Glennon. We'll hold you."

"Have I convinced you?" Glennon asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll have to check your story out."

"It's all the truth."

"We'll see," Costa said.

Later, Costa sat alone in his office, pondering. He honestly did not know what to make of Glennon's story. The man seemed sane enough. His story was plausible enough—as well as implausible enough—to be true. A man's conscience could move him to come in and confess a crime rather than see an innocent person pay for it. But of course many people confessed to crimes for the sake of publicity, or because of some inhibition or disturbance. That occurred every day, particularly with murder cases. Glennon had been pat, blunt, controlled. That could or could not mean something. And he had known about the hammer. Costa didn't think that had been in the papers. The story had been told fairly completely by the papers; there had been pictures of Grimes lying on the floor. Glennon could

have pieced together certain things from that.

Costa shook his head. This certainly was inflation. He had a murder, and for it he had one person all but convicted and another confessing eagerly and logically.

So Costa set about checking Glennon out. He learned that Harold Glennon, aged forty-one, lived alone in a three-room basement apartment in a good part of town, that he had no family and few friends, that he was fairly well to do and did not work. And Glennon had had a dog, neighbors told Costa. The dog disappeared several months ago and Glennon had seemed quite perturbed and then bitter about it.

"I asked him where it went," one neighbor told Costa. "But he wouldn't say. He just said it was gone."

"Had he been very much attached to it?"

"Oh yes. He loved it. That was the one thing you could get him into conversation about."

Checking with the local ASPCA, Costa learned that the collie had been found dead. Through its tag they had notified Glennon who had come down and had been quite distraught.

"What was the cause of death?" Costa asked.

"I have no way of knowing," the man said.

"Where was it found?"

It had been found almost a half mile away from Grime's grocery store.

"If it had been poisoned," Costa asked, "could it have got that far?"

"It depends upon the amount of poison. I would say that it was possible."

"What happened to the dog's remains?"

"Mr. Glennon took them. I understand he had them cremated."

The next day Costa called upon Doctor Robert Franklin, Harold Glennon's physician and, it seemed, the one close friend that the latter had. The doctor was astonished to hear of Glennon's confession.

"It doesn't make sense to me," the doctor said.

"I'm afraid that it does to me," Costa said. "I'm beginning to believe his story."

"It still sounds incredible."

"How long have you known him, Doctor?"

"We were roommates in college. I've known him since then. I think I know him as well as anyone. We've been in touch through the years."

"Would you say that he had that kind of violence in him?" Costa asked.

"No," the doctor said.

"He never married?"

"No. I think he was rather lonely."

"Was he well?" Costa asked.

"Mentally or physically?"

"Both."

The doctor got up and walked

to the window, staring through the blinds at the street, his face absorbed deeply in thought. Costa watched him curiously.

"Lieutenant," the doctor said, "his whole story is a hoax."

"How do you know?"

"I know. I was sworn to secrecy about something. I don't know whether I can violate that confidence."

"I can tell you, doctor, that his life is at stake here."

The doctor turned and faced Costa, smiling wryly. "His life?" The doctor sat down again. "You asked me," he said, "if he was well. Mentally he is well, but physically he is not. Several months ago it was my unpleasant duty to tell him that he was a sick man. A very sick man."

"What?" Costa said.

"It's true. He was always a sickly man anyway. This had a decidedly adverse effect upon his thinking. I think it made him the introverted person that he was. It seems that he had a series of recurrent pains that were diagnosed as a coronary disease. After suffering an attack so painful that it warranted hospitalization, he was told that it looked very much like a coronary case. You can imagine how it affected him. He began to brood upon it. We told him that the diagnosis was not certain, but he was determined to accept it as so. His attitude was gloomily fatalistic and nothing we could say would dissuade him. This soon became an obsession."

"He thinks he's going to die, doctor?"

"He's quite certain of it."

"Do you think it's influenced him in this matter?"

"There's no question of it." The doctor shook his head, smiling grimly. "In fact you might even say that I myself am implicated to a degree. You see, Lieutenant, Harold evinced an interest in this murder almost from the beginning —or from the point where it was announced that the boy had been arrested, when it became plain from the newspapers that he was going to be stuck for it. Harold showed a deep sympathy for the boy. It seems that there were certain parallels between his own and the boy's background—a broken home, an alcoholic father, etc. I never knew what was in his mind of course. He came to my office several times and we sat and discussed the murder. His interest, he said, was purely academic. He asked me my opinion on various aspects of the old man's death, how it might have been inflicted. There had been a rather lengthy and penetrating story about the old man's injuries in the paper. Harold asked me if I thought a lead pipe could have done it. Well, from the manner in which the papers described the old man's skull being crushed, I said no, that it seemed to me that a hammer had to be the

more logical weapon. We talked about it at great length. He studied the pictures, conjecturing upon the way the old man had fallen, that it must have been from a chair, and so on. I went along with him on these things, never dreaming what was in his mind, because I thought it was a good thing for him, it seemed to be occupying his mind so fully. I never dreamed . . ."

"He claims that the old man poisoned his dog."

"His dog did die. But he never told me how. It was an old dog. It could have simply been from old age."

"Then you think that this is all just a noble gesture on his part?"

"I think that's fairly obvious."

"Would you talk to him, doctor?"

"Certainly."

Glennon had been expecting him. He was not surprised when the cell door swung back and the doctor came in. The doctor sat down on the cot with Glennon. The latter seemed amused.

"Harold, what is all this?" the doctor asked.

"It's true, Bob," Glennon said.

"Don't tell me it's true. I know what's in your mind. You just want to help this boy."

"I killed that old man."

"Are you insane? Do you know that you've got Costa almost believing your story? You've got to repudiate it before it's too late."

"I don't want that boy to die for what I did."

"You don't want that boy to die period. He might be a murderer, Hal. You might be sending him out into society to kill again."

"He's not a murderer."

"Suppose I told you that your diagnosis was not complete, that further studies might show that there is nothing wrong with your heart?"

"I would say you were trying to trick me."

"I'm not trying to trick you."

"Of course you are, Bob."

"You've got to believe me, Hal," the doctor said, his voice intense, filled with heat.

"How do you expect me to believe that when even now, at this moment, I can feel the pain in my breast?"

"Give us more time."

"Time is the one thing I don't have anymore," Glennon said. "You say to me that I'm sending a criminal out upon society to possibly murder again: well, aren't you attempting to do the same thing? I'm a murderer."

"I don't believe you. You're not capable of such a thing."

"Costa thinks I am."

"He's beginning to. This is all very noble, Hal. It's almost commendable, but you can't do it."

"Is it so difficult to believe? Perhaps you didn't know me as well as you thought, Bob."

"Why did you ask me all those questions about the murder then?"

"I'll tell you why. Because I knew no one would believe me. You see, I was quite out of my mind when I began hitting the old man. All I remember is wandering about the street with the hammer in my hand. I literally had to find out what I had done, and how, before I went to the police."

The doctor frowned, his eyes falling.

Later, after the doctor had gone, and Glennon was lying on his cot, he thought. Yes, now even he believes it. That last thing convinced him. Gradually they're all going to believe it. And then that boy will have his second chance. God knows I'm doing the right thing. What does it matter how a man dies?

"Dom," Sergeant Clifford said from the doorway.

Costa looked up.

"I've got something that'll interest you." He opened the door all the way and a woman, a blonde, in her forties, but still attractive, walked in, shyly, uncertain, afraid. "Sit down here, Mrs. Wainwright. This is Lieutenant Costa. He wants to hear what you told me."

The woman sat on the edge of the chair, holding her purse against her. Her eyes were rueful, nervous. "I was the woman," she said abruptly. "Willie Bradford was with me that night. I should've told before. I wanted to. But I was afraid. My husband, he's kind of . . . crazy. But I don't want the kid to . . ."

"He was with you that night?" Costa asked.

She began to sob, nodding her head. "Yes, yes. I don't care if my husband knows—I mean, I do care—but what can I do? What is a woman supposed to do?"

"It's all right," Costa said. "Your husband need never know—now."

"Glennon," Costa said.

Glennon stood up, staring at the lieutenant.

"It might please you to know," Costa said, "that the DA is moving to have you indicted."

Glennon nodded. "Of course," he said. "Why not?"

"Willie Bradford went home this morning."

Glennon smiled, bitterly, triumphant.

"His story finally checked out," Costa said.

Glennon's smile stopped. "What do you mean?"

"The woman finally came forward."

Costa knew then, saw it in the one unguarded instant that Glennon permitted, the twitch of smile, the flatness and flash of shock that came into his eyes.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me now?" Costa asked.

Glennon's eyes fell. He turned around, staring reflectively at the concrete walls, the cot, the small barred window beyond which the gray twilight lay soft, attentive. Inaudibly, he sighed. He turned back to Costa. Their eyes met for a moment; then Glennon's fell. "No," he said.

Costa went back to his office. He sat down behind his desk and grimaced. Go ahead and become a cop, he thought, bitter and ironic. You have a murder and for it you have one person all but convicted, and another confessing. You end with the murder still unsolved and an innocent man going nobly to the electric chair figuring he's going to die soon anyway and so it makes no difference. The newspapers will be happy and the public will be happy and most of all the DA will be happy. And the day after this innocent man dies we'll probably find the real murderer and I personally will smash his head open to see if he has a conscience.

On the night that Harold Glennon was to walk to the electric chair, Doctor Franklin sat with his wife, watching the clock, fondling a glass of brandy.

"I was the only one who came to say good-bye," the doctor said. "I told Hal I still was unconvinced by that story of his."

"What did he say?" his wife asked.

"He didn't say anything. He merely gave me an odd smile and turned away."

"You didn't tell him the truth then?"

"No. No. It would have been useless—and cruel."

"How did the doctors in the prison find out?" his wife asked. "You never did tell me."

"I spoke to one of them. It seems Hal took ill, just a week ago, violently ill. Because his pain was really bad, he was hospitalized and he consented to extensive X-rays and tests. And because the pain was more localized, than it had ever been, they were able to find he had stones in his gall bladder and in the ducts. That apparently had been his trouble all along. After the stones were removed, the symptoms of course disappeared. Hal never had anything wrong with his heart. So that noble gesture of his was nothing but a tragic, unnecessary sacrifice. The poor guy. If he'd only have given me more time, I'd have found out what the prison doctors learned, too late . . ."

DRESDEN *alias* FARADAY

by Lawrence Treat

You may very well wonder why Mr. Dresden picked the name Faraday as an alias. Faraday, Michael (1791-1867) was an English scientist who went pretty far before reaching 1867, but everything he did was on the up and up and wholly academic. Why then was his name picked? Human preferences—which would include Mr. Dresden's—are so frequently baffling, are they not?

HE WAS a handsome, dapper man with a graying mustache twisted sharply into points. You took him for a diplomat or an actor of importance. You tried to remember, then, where you'd seen him or his picture. But you hadn't, unless you were a cop.

His name, which was Dresden, meant nothing, for in his racket he used various aliases. Faraday was one of them, and he'd come to the expensive, lake-resort hotel in the hope of meeting a rich widow. Someone silly and simpering and loaded. And instead, he met Denny.

She was young, naive and rich, and aching with lonesomeness. She was a con man's dream and he

tagged her for ten thousand, and every cent a pleasure. If he'd been younger, he'd have swept her off her feet and eloped with her dollars. And like all the others, she'd have stayed behind and been afraid to tell the police. Which was why he'd never been arrested.

Reluctantly, sighing for the good old days, he faced the reality of his advancing years. She was not for him. It was a surprise, therefore, when she practically adopted him.

She was blonde and blue-eyed, she shimmered like the sun on the Mediterranean, and her youth created miracles. For a moment, when she spoke to him on the hotel terrace, romance blazed within him and his mustache vibrated to the tiny, whip-like ends. Then he smiled benignly.

"I feel like your father," he said.

Her limpid, trusting eyes offered him her soul, and her long lashes practically caressed him. "I wish you were. I've never really had one."

"Then elect me. Charles Faraday."

"May I?" Denny said. "I haven't a mother. She died when I was a baby and Caroline is my stepmother and legally I belong to her. She's always gambling and always losing, and she's afraid I'll get married. And I hardly see father. He's always busy."

Charles smiled again, paternally, and decided that the new role fitted him. The police of seventeen states would have been interested in the idea that flitted across his brain, for it was a radical departure from his known techniques, as listed in the files that so many had studied.

"Why," Charles asked, "is she afraid?"

"Because she uses my maintenance money for herself, money my mother left me, and she controls it until I get married. Ron says I should take whatever I can get, or there won't be a cent left."

"Who," he said, "is Ron?" But in a way, he already knew.

"He's my knight errant and my heart's true love," she said rapturously. "But Caroline calls him a fortune-hunter, and he won't tell her what he does."

"Why not?"

Denny's blue eyes shone with merriment. "Because she'd disapprove. He lives dangerously, and that isn't respectable."

Charles considered briefly the cleverness of Ron and remembered, a long time ago, how he himself had told an Ohio heiress that he was a con man. She'd laughed uproariously.

"Perhaps," Charles said mildly, "Caroline is right. Did you ever think of that?"

"I can't think," Denny said. "I haven't been able to, not since the moment Ron stopped on the road and changed a tire for me. That's why I need somebody like you to advise me."

Charles patted her hand, which

was warm and soft. "Tell me more about him."

She laughed gaily. "He's wonderful and I'm in love with him, and Caroline and everybody else are wrong. You see, I was kicked out of college for having him in my room. But it was perfectly innocent; I dared him to and he did, and the dean has no sense of humor. Caroline almost died at the thought of the scandal; she'd do anything to prevent people hearing about it. I haven't told anybody except you."

"How did Ron get in?"

"He picked the lock downstairs. He said it was easy."

Charles nodded. "And he wants to elope with you?"

"Of course. But under the law here, you have to wait to get married, and he won't go to another state."

Charles understood. Take her across a state line and you risk a Mann act violation, which is a federal crime. This Ron knew his way around.

"I suppose," Charles remarked vaguely, "he asked you to bring cash when you elope, and promised to invest it in good, safe securities."

"Oh, yes. He feels badly about getting me expelled and he says that from now on we have to be practical, or else Caroline will use up the rest of my capital. Charles, would you like to meet him?"

"It would be a pleasure," said Charles, who had never before split his take, but he felt that perhaps the time had come.

That evening he danced with Caroline in the casino built out over the lake. By moonlight and Japanese lanterns, she looked reasonably well preserved, and the hardness was only in her eyes. She draped one hand languidly on his shoulder, and she spoke to the point.

"I see that Denny has taken quite a fancy to you," she said.

"And I to her. She's altogether charming." He leaned back and beamed. Because it was against his policy to put all his eggs in one basket, no matter how attractive the basket, he added, "And so are you."

Her hand, unlanguid for a moment, brushed his ear. "From what she said at dinner, I think you could influence her strongly. She's in her room now, waiting for this Ron person to telephone."

"You're intelligent, as well as lovely," he said. "Shall we sit down and have a drink?"

"That would be so nice," she answered.

At the small table, he was conscious of the pressure of her knee. He neither returned the pressure nor withdrew, for she represented intangibles worth considerably more than a few hundred cash, which was all he would appraise her at, under ordinary circumstances.

She removed her knee, sipped

her rum Collins and presented him with her problem. "I'm afraid Denny will run off with him," she said. "And since she's over eighteen, there's nothing I can do about it. You see, her father pays little attention to her, he's too busy making money, although not enough."

"A common failing," Charles said. "The question in your mind is not with whom she elopes, but with what."

"You have an extraordinarily clear mind, Mr. Faraday."

"Charles," he said.

She repeated the name, with meaning. "Charles," she said. "I read an article not long ago about a certain type of confidence man who is irresistible to women. He persuades them to run away with him and to bring their money, but he never does marry them. Instead, he disappears with it, and they're too ashamed to prosecute. I wouldn't be surprised if this Ron Marcy is such a man. Even the name—"

"I've never heard of it," Charles said thoughtfully. "What does he look like?"

"He's tall, dark and handsome. And obviously experienced."

"Caroline, let me look into the matter. Once I meet him, I may know more. I'm an excellent judge of character."

"The trouble is," Caroline said, Denny is threatening to tell my husband that I won't give her anything. I can't hold off much longer, and if he looked into accounts too closely, the consequences would be embarrassing to me."

"I suppose," Charles said, with a far-off look, "that you are in the position to make a short-time loan —so that you'll have some cash to give Denny, if necessary."

"Very short-time," she said.

"Good. I suggest you do so."

He felt that he was in command of the situation, on two flanks.

He saw Denny around ten o'clock that evening. She was glowing with a light that Ron had just transmitted over a telephone wire, but there was sadness in her, too.

"Charles," she said, "I told Ron about you, and he refused to meet you and said I shouldn't trust you."

"Of course you shouldn't," Charles said. "Unless your instincts tell you to."

Denny studied him gravely. "I like you," she said, "and I know you must like me for myself, because you have nothing to gain from me, although you can help me a great deal. But I'm afraid you're going to be against Ron, just like Caroline is."

"On the contrary, I'm interested in everything you've told me about him. But I wish I could talk to him. I can't imagine why he refuses."

"From the way he spoke, from the things he didn't say, I think he's afraid you might recognize him."

Charles chuckled. Denny, despite

her naiveté, had sharp instincts, and he wondered who Ron really was. Obviously the Ron Marcy name was a new alias, for Charles was unfamiliar with it. He wished he, too, had used a different one here, because he was quite certain that Ron had heard of Charles Faraday, and had become wary.

Nevertheless, Charles proceeded according to a plan, which was foolproof. And there was also a piquancy in outwitting another con man, who could never dare go to the police. Charles recalled that his first instinct had been to split, fifty-fifty. Since Ron had made that impossible, Charles would be forced to abscond with the full sum, which he still put at ten thousand.

He played a waiting game for two days, during which he spent long and pleasant hours lounging with Denny on the beach and watching her plunge into the cold, tingling waters of the lake. For himself, he stuck to the warmth of the pool.

"Ron wants me to elope," she told Charles one evening, after a long distance call. "But he insists on my making Caroline hand over my money first. He says she'll never give it to me later on."

"Denny," he said, "take some advice from a friend. Has it occurred to you that Ron might be more interested in your money than in you?"

"Why, Charles!" she said, wrinkling her small, pert nose. "You shouldn't say things like that." Then she tinkled with laughter. "Of course it's occurred to me," she said. "But what can I do?"

"Very simple. Follow the dictates of your heart and go off with him, but bring nothing except yourself."

"No money?" she said. "That sounds like very bad advice."

"There will be money, but I'll take care of it and I'll meet you the next morning. If Ron makes excuses and doesn't marry you, you'll know he was after your money, and nothing will be lost. But if he marries you nevertheless, then all will be well and I'll hand you the sum as a wedding present. Ten thousand, and not a cent less."

Denny blinked. "I don't know how to thank you. But Caroline doesn't part so easily with that much."

"I have ways," Charles said confidently. "Just leave it to me."

He danced with Caroline later that night and murmured flatteries into her receptive ear. He was sorry she was married, and he thought fleetingly of some of the cruder forms of fleecing her, but they were risky. Besides, he was ready to act.

"Caroline," he said, "Denny won't elope until she has money, and she has to elope in order to learn her bitter lesson and get over this infatuation. And after Ron deserts her, she won't fall in love again for a long, long time, and you'll be able to administer her

funds without worry."

"Yes, but what if you're wrong? What if Ron does marry her?"

"He won't. And even if he should, I'll return the money to you. Either way, you lose nothing. All you have to do is give me the money."

"But it's a lot to trust you with," she said. "Ten thousand in cash . . . I don't think I should."

Of course not. I wouldn't dream of asking you just to give it to me, with no guarantee," he said.

He took a long, thick envelope from his pocket and showed her the ten, one-thousand dollar bonds. They looked like government bonds and had cost him five dollars apiece just to have printed. He permitted her to examine them not to closely.

"We'll seal the envelope and put it in the hotel safe, in your name. If I don't show up—" he laughed at the ridiculousness of the idea—"or if I break my word and give anything to Denny, then you keep the bonds. They'll be here in your name. Otherwise, when I return your money, you give the bonds back to me. That's fair, isn't it? And you risk nothing."

"Why, yes," she said.

Charles made certain that she noticed the small ink blot on the envelope that he put in his pocket as they walked to the desk. A similar ink blot was on the envelope that he handed to the hotel clerk for safe-keeping, but only Charles knew that it contained merely blank sheets of paper. For he was not one to risk a charge of possessing counterfeit, government bonds. Besides, he would need them in the future. Often.

A couple of days later Charles Dresden, alias Charles Faraday, taxied to Idlewild airport, picked up his reservation on the flight to Mexico, weighed in his baggage and walked briskly to the gate. As he approached it, he hesitated, for he recognized the tall, pleasant-looking man who was standing there. Immediately Charles pulled down the brim of his hat and made a detour. The man, however, marched forward rapidly and overtook him.

"Better forget about your plane," he said, dropping his hand on Charles' shoulder. "You're Charles Dresden, alias Charles Faraday, and you've been followed ever since you left the hotel. You have ten thousand dollars in your pocket."

"Me?" said Charles. "There must be some mistake. By what right—"

"I'm Detective Ron Marcy," the tall man said. "I've been after you for years, and here's the warrant. And Denny, my brand-new wife—*she* swore it out."

HIS WONDERS TO PERFORM

by Gladys Cluff

A newsy aspect to a character usually helps. Whoever, originally, concocted the gruff codger and/or the tough dame with a heart of gold, obviously went too far. Miss MacPherson has a personality, however, that rates more than the dubious accolade "heart warming."

Miss MacPherson felt like God, or at least his assistant principal, as the grim old judge smiled down at eighteen-year-old Wesley Burton—a tall good-looking boy, a boy who looked *good*—and who just that minute had been acquitted of holding up a taxi and fatally shooting a police officer. The judge permitted the boy to join his hysterical mother.

"Darling, you're free!" The

woman held her only child, safe once again until embarrassed, he forcibly drew away. Miss MacPherson was standing right behind them. And she watched as Mrs. Burton turned to her, saying to her son, "Miss MacPherson saved your life, Wesley!"

Miss MacPherson saw the boy's faintly blank look as an appraising one. He seemed to be wondering why she had testified with such urgent necessity that she had seen him in his own backyard at the time of the shooting, six blocks away. And she imagined him asking himself: What was there in it for her—a horse-faced old dame thirty or forty years old, a school-teacher, a math school teacher! Then as though believing her thoughts, Wesley shook her hand so hard that Miss MacPherson blushed.

"Gosh," the boy said, and the reverence in his voice *couldn't* have been tainted with sarcasm, "I didn't know there *were* folks like you. If you hadn't said what you did, it'd been tough. It sure would have."

"Oh, surely anyone—" she demurred.

"Missing your classes, sitting around this dopey place."

He spoke low, in that vibrant manly way she liked. And he seemed to be standing almost deliberately between her and his mother, so that the two of them were really alone as he explained privately: "I mean, to help out a guy you don't even hardly know."

Never in her life had Catherine MacPherson been looked at so *personally* by a male. It embarrassed her. But she couldn't help noticing that it also made her feel very agreeably — *smugly?* — alive and warm. The way that popular red-haired junior girl probably felt all the time; especially when she could irritate poor nice Professor Chapin, whose wife was barely six months dead, into taking a good long stare at her and then fidgeting so miserably.

"Well, good-bye, Miss MacPherson. And gosh, thank *you!*"

"Oh, but aren't you—I'd hoped, if everything turned out all right, you'd both come over to my house for lunch, to celebrate. And since moving next door to you, I haven't had you over. I bought six lamb chops—little thick loin ones—" Her voice trailed off, disappointed.

"Wesley wants to go down to my sister's in Sunnyvale," his mother explained for him, "and help with the fruit. Get away from here for awhile. I thought I'd drive him right on down. I'm terribly sorry about your lovely chops and all. I wouldn't want you to think Wesley don't appreciate all that you—"

"Aw," said the boy, "she doesn't want to hear all *that.*"

Odd that she had never noticed his left eyelid before; only a slight droop, but it did change him a little.

"Come *on,* Mom!"

So Miss MacPherson went home on the bus alone, feeling a trifle lost after four weeks of life-and-death drama in which incredibly she, Catherine MacPherson, had played, actually, *the* vital part. For if she had not been able through sheer rightness to make that jury believe her, an innocent boy would have been *executed,* for murder!

Before going to bed that night Miss MacPherson went upstairs to close a door that was banging in the wind, and she stood a moment looking out the window of her first real home. Already she loved this old San Francisco house, so narrowly upright, with its view from every window—of the fairy-tale Bay, the climbing, crooked white streets, the church spire in the valley with its morning and evening bells. Generous thankfulness flooded her heart that she happened to go up to the spare room on that fatal night to close the same banging door, and had opened this very window to listen to the Angelus ringing its quaint nine-thirty curfew. She could recall the scene precisely, for it had occurred only two months ago, exactly two months ago, and tonight the same three-quarter moon rode bright above a landscape stereoscopic in its clarity. In the Burtons' neglected garden below her, the same strong wind that blew so hard on that other night was beating the wild sweet alyssum into white foam in the moonlight, tearing leaves right off the apricot tree.

Wesley had been up in that tree picking fruit. (Wasn't that just like the crazy way he'd been acting lately, his mother had sighed; doing it at night like that, not to give her the satisfaction! She'd been after him to pick those apricots for a week!) He had been singing that tune he always sang; it seemed to come from all directions at once in the contradicting wind. And he'd had on that blue plaid shirt she liked. As a gust of wind flattened the top branches of the tree, she had seen Wesley up there reaching out for an apricot, clear as a cameo against the silvery, pale sky.

Tonight, even as she thought of this, the upper branches flattened suddenly just as they had done before—Why, there *was* Wesley now! In the same plaid shirt, reaching out—but stiffly. With *both* arms.

And the same tune.

Miss MacPherson's heart thudded, and slowed.

Sickeningly, the last of the new delicious importance she'd been feeling drained away, and she knew herself drearily for a meddling old maid. A fool. With derisive finality the silvery magic fled from the night; instead she saw a brown courtroom that smelled of kerosene, the perspiration of frightened people, and varnish. She remembered giving Mrs. Burton her only Kleenex. Wesley shaking her hand.

So that was why he had stared at her in that oddly intimate way. And his left eyelid—Had he been winking at her? Oh, no!

Yet when to clear her soiled mind of this nightmare she leaned out the window and breathed deeply of the clean windy night, the singing came again, unfocused by the swirling wind but obviously from someone's radio or television, down the hill. And the plaid shirt and outstretched arms were as undeniably those of a scare-crow—to frighten the birds away from the reddening apricots.

Miss MacPherson closed the window and sat down on the bed, in the dark.

Wesley! An eighteen year old boy, a *killer?* (That's what they'd said.) But he couldn't be just a boy, to have planned so skillfully, with what almost must have been experience, and to have carried out that plan so brutally. No, Wesley was a *man.* Tall enough, certainly. With a deep, really a heavy voice. And handsome . . . Heavens! What must he have thought of her!

Then, for all her burning face, even at the peak of her terrible chagrin, Catherine MacPherson knew she was not sorry. Today, yes, she had blocked the wheels of justice, flouted that ages-old doctrine—pre-Christian definitely—of an eye for an eye; a life for a life. That was the law. But that way, the law's way, the answer came out *minus two people!* Man-made law wasn't absolutely everything; beyond it was a world's even older principle of survival, the maintenance of a simple natural balance: death-and-replacement. And this basic law she *had* obeyed; she had replaced a death, not with the vengeance of another death, but with the true instrument of balance, a *life.* Would this young man take *more* lives, and again upset that balance? Maybe, she sighed. But maybe *not.* It was out of her hands, thank heaven. And thank *heaven* it was too late to undo what she'd done. There was that blessed law that no individual shall be placed twice in jeopardy for the same offense.

For because of her action, hers alone, a man's whole life would be lived. Good or bad, good *and* bad of course, like anybody's, but *lived.* It was almost—she wasn't ashamed of the tears in her eyes—as if she had given, literally given, a son to the world!

She had felt her cheeks burning when he kept her hand so long there in the courtroom; now the same warm aliveness coursed through her veins again, with that secret surge of pride. And something even more wonderful occurred to Miss MacPherson. She could still have a son of her own! She wasn't old. She was simply an adult submerging deeper and deeper under a new wave of teen-age crises every fifty minutes, by an electric school bell. There was time

yet, great uncompartmented Time, for anything!

Snapping on a light, she stood before the mirror. In the top drawer was a piece of green Christmas ribbon; she tied it around her head. Heavens, she *did* look an idiot. But then combing a little of her front hair down over her forehead, she looped it back—thick and almost auburn, with that premature streak of gray to highlight one big smooth curve, it might . . . Recklessly, with the nail scissors, she whacked her hair off into bangs, brushing them out from underneath as she had seen that junior girl do to make the ends curve under, before she allowed herself to look.

She stared. At *herself?* The clean-cut horizontal line of brow made her eyes a deep, excited, mysterious blue that asked, and gave, some not yet identified but wondrous promise.

Miss MacPherson taught in a girls' high-school. She knew adolescence when she saw it. She stood very still, but not a drop of her blood was quiet.

"You'll never know it; I'm sure you wouldn't care, if you did," she said to her mental image of a boy's young face, a face she'd remember to her dying day. "But *you* saved a life today, too. Mine. Thank you —Wesley."

She closed the door and went downstairs, trying to remember when it was that she had come down — what stairs? — with this pleasant feeling of *expectancy*. Yes, it was those dormitory stairs, at college, her freshman year! All the new girls, in party dresses, going down together to the freshman-sophomore jolly-up, to meet the freshman boys. Now, of course, it was the *end* of term, late spring. Well then—she smiled a little—could fall be far behind? She kept on smiling.

Tomorrow would be Saturday. Perhaps lunch, after Faculty Meeting? There were those six loin chops in the refrigerator. The poor man probably hadn't eaten a home-cooked meal since heaven knew when.

She looked up the number and dialed.

"Professor Chapin? This is Cathy MacPherson."

by Allen Kim Lang

I am quite sure that even the most squeamish among you will enjoy this amiable tale of drug addiction. Should you disagree, you may tear the top off of something, but your money will definitely not be refunded. For the serious among you, I hereby irrevocably state that what we have here is nothing more than a pastiche, signifying nothing—but entertainment.

This Is A Watchbird Watching YOU

SKREEN, a man with no friends and a precarious profession, answered his doorbell with muscles poised for judo and alibis ready on his tongue. But Skreen had been lucky for years, and he was lucky tonight. No big foot rammed forward to kick the door off its peep-chain; no pistol-muzzle peeked in through the gap; no one bowled in steaming teargas bombs the way the Dope Cops did in Skreen's worryings.

This midnight visitor wasn't on the Narcotics Squad. She was trembling, wet-eyed, out of breath; one moment yawning, the next choking back a spasm of nausea. Skreen flipped the peep-chain loose and grabbed the girl into his living room. This kid was customer for a fix. He made sure the nightlatch caught and set the peep-chain's holder back in its channel. "Who saw you come up here?" he demanded.

"I got here invisible," the girl said. "Sneaked in the back way, hoofed up twenty-three flights. That sounds high, dad; real high; but I'm down, 'way down." She leaned back against the door with her eyes shut, gasping. "I don't jolt quick. I'll die here all in a knot."

"Who put you on I pushed junk?" Skreen asked.

"Boom-Boom. He passed word you're the big peddler just before they put him on the train for Lex," she said.

"Boom-Boom's got a runny mouth," Skreen said. "He'd be smart not to come back from the bluegrass." He grabbed the girl by one arm, pulled her upright, unbuttoned her jacket and stripped it off. The elbow fold of her left arm was padded. Skreen tugged the bandage loose. The skin underneath looked like a bedsore. "Ought to cook your needle, honey," he suggested. "Ever hear about germs?" He tossed her jacket onto a chair.

"Now you know I'm for real, you gonna give me that fix?"

"*Give?* Honey, I don't dig *give,*" Skreen said. "The word that gets to me is *sell.*" He walked over to the big window that faced, across a playground, a block of apartments identical to the one he lived in. On the ledge outside his window were half a dozen potted ge-

ranium plants, fat-stemmed and rank-smelling. Skreen dipped his fingertips into the black dirt of the second flowerpot from the right and brought out a tiny envelope of waxed paper. "This is half a spoon of brown H," he told the girl. He walked over to wave his merchandise under her nose. "This is the prime stuff, honey. Sugar this deck eight to one, and you got yourself a dozen fixes. I don't retail regular, dig?; but you can take this goody home for fifty." Skreen tossed the packet from hand to hand, watching the trembling girl. "Say something, hey? You want to pop, or you run up two dozen sets of steps just to dig the cat?"

"Fifty dollars?" she whispered.

"You don't like my price, try the Red Cross," Skreen suggested. "They're in the charity business."

"I haven't got fifty bucks."

"So you're angling for a price-cut, too," Skreen said. "OK, honey. To get you out of my pad I'll let you score for a low, low forty. Forty bucks and you can cut down twenty-three flights with your head on straight."

"I don't have dime one," the girl said. "But I'm hurting, dad." She hugged her arms across her belly to control the cramps. Then, smiling with her teeth clenched, she reached out one trembling hand to stroke the lapel of Skreen's dressing gown. "Give me one jolt, and I'll stick around later for anything you got in mind."

Skreen slapped the girl's hand off him. He dropped the envelope of heroin into his pocket. "You carrying no gold, honey, you got nothing I want. You want to float, you got to pay your fare."

She grabbed his arm. "Dad, I'll do anything!" She let go Skreen and clutched at her middle to fight the cramps.

Skreen twisted the nightlatch, freed the chain, darted his head into the hall. He grabbed the girl and trotted her toward the door. "Do me good to kick you down a step at a time, I wasn't so tired."

"I'll blow the whistle!" she screamed. "I'll yell to the nabs that it's you Boom-Boom and the others push for; I'll tell how you bury your Horse in flowerpots." Skreen slapped his hand over her mouth, dragged her back inside, locked the door again. He grunted as she bit his hand, and retaliated by rapping his knuckles against her teeth. "I'll even with you for that!" she promised. "I'll tell 'em to send a man to Lex and bring back Boom-Boom. He'll talk like the judge was his mother, and you'll ship out to the pen carrying every junk rap in the law library." She doubled up, her face taut with nausea. Skreen pulled back from her. The girl straightened up and ran to the window. Grabbing the second-from-the-right flowerpot, she cracked it against the window ledge and was pawing through soil and roots when Skreen grabbed her around the hips and

hoisted her out over the flowerpots. A couple of the geraniums tottered and almost followed the girl. Skreen raked them back to safety.

She mewed like a kitten all the way down. The last sound, at the bottom, was tiny and wet. Skreen stepped back from the window. She must have hit the hedges bordering the playground. When his breathing had slowed he peered down at the playground. No flashlights bobbed toward the body, no excited voices yelled for other excited voices to come and take a look. The girl had fallen into the night and disappeared.

Using two magazines as broom and dustpan, Skreen swept up the uprooted geranium and the shards of its pot. He picked several of his waxed-paper envelopes from the sweepings, added the deck from his pocket, and replanted the heroin in the soil of the five remaining flowerpots. He wiped the black dirt from his hands with his handkerchief and dropped the magazines, the sweepings, and the handkerchief into his wastebasket. Too bad about that geranium, he mused. He'd have to buy a replacement tomorrow.

Nothing in the girl's jacket. In her purse a pack of Kleenex, a lighter, some keys, seven cents, and the tools of her habit: a strip of elastic, a 2-cc syringe and a needle, a wad of cotton, and her cook-spoon. The spoon was blackened by having been heated over the cigarette lighter. Skreen dumped the stuff back into the purse, opened his door and peered out into the hallway. No haps there. The girl said she'd sneaked up the stairs. Good; he'd do the same, and sneak higher. He draped the jacket over the purse to hide it, and padded down the hall to the stairwell.

The roof was five flights up. Skreen stepped out next to the elevator enclosure, a box one story high, perched on the roof of the main building. All the motors were silent. The squares were bedded down for the night, Skreen thought, all nine-to-five types, in the sack at sundown. Carrying the girl's purse and jacket, he climbed the steel ladder to the top of the elevator shed. He walked to the unprotected edge and looked over. Three hundred feet below him that hype kid was splashed over the scene, but in the dark he couldn't see a thing. He stepped back from the roof edge, wary of the night-wind pressing into his back. Bracing his feet into the gravel roof, he polished the clasp of the purse against the hem of his dressing-gown before tossing it over the edge to join its owner on the playground.

Skreen climbed down a yard from the roof of the elevator shed and hung the girl's jacket on the top rung of the ladder, like a banner, where the nabs mooching around in the morning would be sure to spot it. The kid had been a user; they'd know that from the

gear in her purse and the needle-tracks in her arm. The bulls from Narcotics and Homicide would stand on the edge of the roof of the elevator shed and jump to the conclusion that she'd been just another junkie kicking her habit the one sure way, getting the cure that comes at the end of a five-second flight.

When he went back downstairs to his apartment, Skreen left the door to the roof stand open. A draft blew up the stairwell, another clue to push the law toward the answer he wanted them to get. He watched the late show on TV, washed down a braunschweiger sandwich with a couple beers, and went to bed.

Skreen's day began with a trip downstairs, at noon, for breakfast. Alone in the elevator with the operator, he made an opening for conversation. "Looks like a great day," he said.

"Great?" the old man asked. "Mister Skreen, this is the worst day this place had in thirty years. Some doll brodied off our roof last night. First suicide we had since 1936. Smashed her all up, right next to the teeter-totters."

"Didn't know," Skreen apologized.

"Awful," the operator said. "One of the cops said she left some of her clothes hanging on a ladder there, like she was going swimming."

"Person have to be crazy," Skreen said.

"Never find me jumping off roofs," the operator said, opening the door at ground floor. "Not even all dressed up."

Skreen checked the morning paper over his sausage and eggs. The dead girl was fitted into an inch of space on page five, headlined as an unidentified suicide. There was no mention of her having been an addict. Her body, which had bounced off a section of hedge onto the fulcrum of a teeter-totter, had been discovered by a boy crossing the playground on his way to the grocery for milk.

For guidance through his day, Skreen examined the horoscope column. Today the stars advised him, as a Moon Child, to "... make collections, pay debts. Put long-considered plans quickly into action. P.M. you will talk with an important person." With his second cup of coffee, Skreen digested this intelligence. Good day for pickups and payoffs, but what about the plans he was supposed to jump with? Probably meant he'd be smart to find himself a fresh pad, a project that had been hanging fire for months. Half the hypes in town must know his address by now, especially since Boom-Boom blabbed. Couldn't have junkies sailing out his window every night; but he couldn't cut out today, either. The screws from Homicide might wonder why he'd moved, what had bugged him. Maybe the stars would let him wait a week, Skreen thought. He got up from

the table, anxious to get the day begun, impatient to meet the important person due him in the afternoon.

Carrying his briefcase, he set to work. He delivered three packages of Horse to drops where his pushers would pick them up, cut the strong brown heroin with lactose or rice-flour, and pass the diluted junk on to their customers. Skreen visited Bailey's Place, the bar maintained as headquarters for the organization's punitive department. He gave one of the muscles the name of a pusher who'd taken a junkie's credit for three hundred dollars' worth of dust. The junkie was in the county jail now, sweating ninety days of cold turkey. The pusher couldn't pungle up Skreen's three hundred. Skreen was impatient. He gave the strongman instructions to dump the erring pusher hard enough to remind him that dope is a cash-and-carry trade.

Skreen's third chore was to leave an envelope fat with twenty-, fifty-, and hundred-dollar bills in a locker at the Greyhound station. Tomorrow he'd pick up from that locker a tobacco can filled with tan powder, enough Horse to keep a head on fifteen hundred hypes over the coming week end.

At four Skreen was done for the day. He shopped for a fresh geranium and took it to a square bar where he had a couple of beers. Then, the potted plant under his arm, he headed for his apartment.

He was taking a shower when the phone rang. Nobody knew his number but the people he worked for, who sometimes phoned slang-coded instructions. Those people didn't care to be kept waiting. Skreen ran dripping to the living room, leaving the shower squirting, and snatched up the phone. "Yeah?" he asked, his voice cautious.

"Giving any flying lessons today?" a strange voice asked.

"You got the wrong number, Buster," Skreen said.

"Don't ring off," the stranger said. "Without doubt you're a wrong number in most contexts, but for now you're the very person to whom I'd intended to speak." There was a noise from the phone like the snorting of an impatient horse. "Get down, Blouzalind!" the man said, speaking aside from the telephone.

"Who the hell are you?" Skreen demanded.

"You may call me Tom," the stranger said, "peeping Tom. Now, if you'd like, I'll hold the phone while you pop back into the bathroom for a towel. I shouldn't care to have you take cold, standing there all wet and shivering."

Skreen twisted to look out the window. He could see nobody in the apartment house across the playground, the twin to the building he stood in; nothing but the sun-reflecting mirrors of its windows. "Getting a bit of a corpora-

tion, aren't you?" Tom observed. "Exercise is what you need." Skreen moved back from the window, staring toward the building across the way. The stranger chuckled. "Yes, Mr. Skreen; peeping Tom is watching you now. But do please get a towel about you. In the buff, you're by no means an attractive sight."

Skreen, ignoring the bit about the towel, dropped to the sofa, still looking out the window. "Why have you called me?" he asked. "How do you know my name?"

"You're a generous tipper, Mr. Skreen," Tom said, "and doormen know the names of generous tippers. I simply asked one of them who had the southeast corner apartment on the twenty-third floor. Native wit, Mr. Skreen; simple native wit. I called you because I wanted to talk with you about my hobby. I'm quite keen on anthropology—you know, watching my fellowmen make fools of themselves. There's a good deal an amateur like myself can learn with the aid of a good pair of binoculars, particularly when he faces a flat like yours, lighted up half the night like a bloody airdrome. You've furnished me some diverting moments, Mr. Skreen." The snorting noises began again. "Down, Blouzalind! Sit!" Tom shouted at his invisible companion. "Your pardon, Mr. Skreen."

"If you're done digging the cat, I'd kind of like to wash the soap outta my eyes," Skreen said. "Anything else you want?"

"That should be self-evident," Tom said. "I want money."

"For doing what?" Skreen asked.

"How circumspect of you to pretend you don't know," Tom said. "For doing nothing, of course. For neglecting my civic duty to go to the police and tell them that I saw you, wearing a scarlet gown, struggle with a girl last night in your apartment. That I saw you hoist that girl, up-a-daisy, over your little potted flowerbed and out the window."

"This shapes like a shakedown," Skreen said. "So what's the ante, man?" He peered out at the building across the playground, watching for movement, the flash of binoculars that would give away his blackmailer's ambush. Sunlight blinked back from the wall of windows. "Tom?" Skreen asked. "How much it gonna set me back to keep you cool?"

"Ten thousand dollars is my set price for a sin of omission."

"Ten thou'?" Skreen exploded. "Man, you're twisted!"

"This is no occasion for penny-pinching, Mr. Skreen," Tom said. "When one lives at the altitude you do, defenestrating girls is bound to be dear. Ten thousand dollars wouldn't buy you free from a charge of murder. Now, would it? No more chaffering, please. I'll telephone tomorrow at the same time to tell you where and how to de-

liver my money. Till then, Mr. Skreen, Cheerio!"

Skreen fit the telephone into its cradle. He shivered. In that building across the way, someone was standing with binoculars trained on him. He stood up from the sofa, drawing in his little paunch, and walked to the bathroom for his towel without another glance through the window.

That astrology column this morning had been hip to the haps, Skreen thought as he laced his shoes. The stars had predicted he'd talk with an important person today, and that's just where he was going now. Peeping Tom, if he shot his mouth, could turn this town so hot nothing would be cool. Someone had to give Tom the turn-on. That's where the Moon Child prediction of an important person came in. Skreen was going right on up to Sowbelly Bailey for help.

Sowbelly Bailey hid his peculiar talent behind the bar at Bailey's Place, which he maintained as the squarest joint in the city. He had a little electric bowling-alley, a jukebox stacked with Lawrence Welk and mountain music, chintz aprons on the girls who waited table, and signs on the walls like, "If You Spit on the Floor at Home, Go Home and Spit!" Sowbelly's nickname was tribute to his tribal origins, not a comment on his contours. His work kept him lean as a Marine fresh out of boot-camp. He'd come down from the hills right into the big town, where native genius had pushed him up from anonymity in the organization's goon-pool to his present invisible eminence as the city's extra-legal Provost Marshall, Enforcer, and Chief Executioner.

Sowbelly Bailey pointed Skreen to a corner table and brought over two glasses and a pitcher of dark beer. Skreen sat dubiously, glancing at the dozen customers seated at the bar, the open door, the plate glass window behind him, through which a traffic cop and an occasional squadcar were visible. "Safe to talk out here, Sowbelly?"

Bailey sat and poured beer. "With a mouth like yours it ain't hardly safe to talk nowheres," he said. "Sure. We'll talk out here, right in front of God and his boarders. If you come to check on that holdout pusher of yours, he got the treatment. I had the troops stave in a coupla his ribs and bash his teeth off level with his gums. They gave him a shot of M, then, so's he wouldn't feel his hurts. That okay with you?"

"Maybe I ain't digging you, Sowbelly," Skreen said. "What's the good of scrambling the stud if you don't let him hurt?"

"Too bad you ain't got more smart," Bailey said. "Look-a-here. What manner of pusher always pays up right on time, come whatever? I'll tell you: the safest kind of pusher is a fellow that needs the stuff bad as his customers. So we're just helping that chinch of yours

get his self hooked. We'll hold him down for another free fix tomorrow, maybe one the next day, till he's nailed. From then on, that boy will buy his own kicks; and he'll work a long day developing new talent to pay for his powder."

"Sploud!" Skreen said. "I should have thought that up, man."

"Guess maybe thinking ain't your long suit," Bailey said. "You come over here just to find out how bad we dumped your buddy, or you get the colic about something new?"

"Dig this," Skreen invited him. "Last night, when I was just getting eyes for some sack time, this bear falls up to my pad, a hype looking to score for free. Boom-Boom made me to her just before they bluegrassed him. Anyway, this chick angled around me, looking like she's as ready to shive me as pick my pocket; but when it came to free samples of Horse, naturally I said her Nay. She got set for another round, trying to trade me for the dust what would be a drag for nothing. We tangled when she started to strongarm the stuff, and she just flew out the window. But that ain't my problem."

"You got cops?" Bailey asked.

"Nay, man," Skreen said. "I set things up for the nabs to dig my junkie jumped off the roof—I scattered her mink and pearls and stuff—and they got conned. The heat never touched me. Push comes to shove, Sowbelly, I could dig up some doobies to declare they were with me on the juice across town, last night. But for one hitch."

"Someone see the doll go into your apartment?" Bailey suggested.

"Worse'n that," Skreen said. "Some cat saw the doll fly out my window. A square across the way, calls himself Tom, was watching my pad through binoculars. He gets his kicks with binoculars, dig? Today he phones me. Says it'll take ten grand to keep him from making me to the nabs. Bad, man."

"Bad," Bailey agreed. "It'd break my heart to see you clutching jailbars. Worst thing of all is you'd hi-fi everything you know, if only the cops asked you to."

"Not me, Sowbelly!" Skreen testified. "They could burn me up with those bright lights, wear out a hundred feet of hose beating me, and I'd never even whisper."

"You'd squirm like a worm in hot ashes and sing like a laying hen," Bailey said. "Drink your beer—you're gonna pay for it. Skreen, you got yourself the best racket next to preaching. I bet you net fifteen hundred a week."

Skreen sipped his beer. "I got lots of expenses," he said. "Overhead and stuff."

"That's a batch of birdlime," Bailey said. "You don't do diddle-oh. You can't as much as keep your pushers in line without my troops bruise 'em up ever couple of weeks. Ever time somebody hands you a little static, you bawl for me to come prop up your playhouse."

"I manage a tough turf, Sowbelly," Skreen said.

"What you mean is I manage your tough turf while you prink around like a peaked pullet," Bailey said. "Now let's get this mess of yours settled. How far off is the window this binocular fellow looks at you out of?"

"About three hundred yards," Skreen said. "I ain't sure which window is his, though."

"I maybe got a way to find that out," Bailey said. "Skreen, boy, you ever in the Army?"

Skreen set down his beer and leaned over the table toward Bailey. "Was I in the Army? Man, I was sergeant before the ink was dry on my draft notice. I went right into Infantry; that's the best; we call it Queen of Battle. I got a Good Conduct Medal and one of them red ropes to hang around my shoulder. Was I in the Army? Man, I can soldier like General Grant!"

"I bet you soldier like I drop kittens," Bailey said, "but don't fret about it. What I got to know, General Grant, is do you remember what end of a rifle you point, what end you prop up on your shoulder?"

"Can I shoot a rifle? Wow! Man, I sounded like a half-track when I marched, I had so many of them little dangly plates hanging off my Expert badge."

"Save the snow-job," Bailey said. "I ain't recruiting for the American Legion drill team. Skreen, maybe you never thought of it this way, but the job me and my boys do is kinda like janitor work. We clean up other people's messes. This time, Dead-Eye, I'm gonna let you mop up your own little puddle. Now listen clear, cause if you foul me up you'd be better off in Hell with your back broke. Hear?"

"I dig you," Skreen said.

"Okay. Last thing first. Soon as you do what you're gonna do, you got yourself a date in L. A. You refrigerate this Tom, and before he's all the way cool you'll be inside a airplane. Hear, boy?"

"Loud and clear," Skreen said.

"If there's the littlest, bittiest splash," Bailey said, "you won't be around to see the ripples. Figure to do this job dead right." Bailey drained his beer, scooted back his chair, and said, "Now's the time for you to say good-bye, run on home, telephone yourself a girlfriend to come up right away, and wait for me. I'll come over in about a hour with the tools you're gonna need. Now get!"

Skreen stood up. "Sowbelly, do you mind telling me what I got to call a chick for?" he asked.

"Do like I say," Bailey suggested. "Maybe you can put off being a angel for a few more years. Okay?"

"Okay," Skreen said. "You know where my pad is, Sowbelly?"

"I know where ever body's pad is," Bailey said. "Go, boy!"

Skreen, soon as he'd gotten back to his apartment, called one of the

escort services directed by the organization. Since Skreen was known to the booking agent as both a ranking organization man and a valued client, he was promised the immediate attentions of a girl named Cozy.

Cozy, who showed up carrying a hatbox twenty minutes later, was a confection of honeyblonde hair, skin sleek as the enamel on this year's Frigidaire, and the profile, fore and aft, of one of the more conspicuous Cadillacs. She was a superior product, market-ripe. It was easy to forget that Cozy, like the other consumer goods she so much resembled, would be only a trade-in in a couple more years. "I heard about you, Mr. Skreen," Cozy said, grabbing his arm to show the aptness of her professional name. "I heard from some of the girls you're a real doll."

"Maybe so, maybe no," Skreen said, shaking his arm loose. "Sit it down anywheres. I got a friend coming over to tell us what to do."

Cozy sniffed. "Wouldn't it be privater if you bought one of those books in a plain wrapper?"

"My friend is Sowbelly Bailey," Skreen explained.

"So excuse me for breathing," Cozy said.

"I ain't trying to bug you," Skreen said. "Why don't you slop yourself up a drink while we're sweating out Sowbelly?"

"If you got some boiled eggs or something, maybe I could take a little nourishment," Cozy said. "I ain't what you'd call real thirsty."

"There's a couple little steaks in the refrigerator," Skreen said. "Fry 'em up, if you want to."

"Thanks," Cozy said, getting up and hurrying toward the kitchen. "The way to a girl's heart is through her stomach, if you'll pardon the expression." In a moment there was the hiss of cold meat on a frying-pan. Skreen wrinkled up his nose at the meaty odor coming in from the kitchen, rich as gravy. He wasn't hungry, not with Sowbelly due any minute. To clear out the smell he opened the window over the playground. He sat back on the sofa, looking toward the place where peeping Tom lived. Some of the windows over there were open, too. Was one of them Tom's? How did Sowbelly figure to spot one man in that maze?

Cozy brought in an open can of beer. "Thought maybe this'd help you wait," she said, sitting next to Skreen on the arm of the sofa. "That Sowbelly Bailey chills me, know what I mean? If I'd knew he was gonna be here, I'd of took sick and stayed home."

"Don't worry about Sowbelly," Skreen said, accepting the beer. "Me and him are practically blood-brothers."

"I bet he's bumped off more people than most people have swatted flies," Cozy said.

"If Sowbelly cut notches on his

gun, he'd have a crosscut saw," Skreen said.

The doorbell rang. Skreen shooed Cozy back to the kitchen to tend to her steaks. He opened the door. "This where you having TV trouble, mister?" Sowbelly Bailey asked. He was wearing white overalls and carrying a huge tool kit.

"Yeah, this is the place," Skreen said, letting Bailey in. "Can't get a picture for love nor money, and I twisted all the knobs." He locked the door. Bailey set down his tool kit and slapped the beer out of Skreen's hand. "What the hell, Sowbelly?" Skreen demanded, looking down at the foaming puddle on his carpet.

"When a man's got the kind of work to do we got, he don't better be drinking beer first," Bailey explained. He bent to open his tool kit, displaying the ACME TELEVISION SERVICE blazoned across the back of his overalls in red embroidery. Under a top tray of small tools, the kit held a pair of leather-holstered binoculars. Beside the binoculars was Sowbelly Bailey's chosen instrument: a slide action big game rifle, field-stripped to fit the kit, each assembly nested in velvet. Bailey sat cross-legged on the floor to assemble the rifle, handling the walnut and steel with the knowing touch of a lover. He proved the action, fit one cartridge into the chamber, and closed the bolt. Bracing his elbows between his knees, he sighted out the window toward the apartment house from which Tom did his spying.

Cozy, carrying a steak sandwich with one bite out of it, stopped in the kitchen doorway. "If there's gonna be shooting," she said, muffled by sandwich, "I'm cutting out right now."

Sowbelly Bailey pivoted on his hip-bones. The blonde found herself staring down the muzzle of his Remington. "You go anywhere before I say so, girl, and you'll be toting flowers on your chest," he said. "I got work for you to do."

"Okay," she wailed, "Okay!"

Bailey bounced to his feet and handed Skreen his rifle. Skreen balanced the rifle on the palm of his hand to inspect it, then spun it. "Watch that stuff, boy," Bailey said. "That ain't no baton you're twirling. Now come on in the bedroom."

The window in the bedroom faced east, the same direction as the bigger window in the living room, toward Tom's apartment. "Set down that gun and help me muscle this bed of your'n over by the window," Bailey ordered. Skreen laid the rifle on his dresser to help Bailey wrestle the bed, an eight-by-eight-foot wedding-cake of sponge rubber and green satin, nearer the window. Bailey, recovering his rifle from the dresser, belly-flopped onto the bed, cuddling the butt of the gun into his shoulder and against his cheek. "Great," he said. "Try it on for size, Hot-Shot."

Skreen obediently took Bailey's place on the bed, snuggling down flat and peering along the sights. "Which window you want I should bust in, Sowbelly?" he asked.

"Don't mash that trigger!" Bailey said. He went back to his tool kit to get his binoculars, then knelt between the bed and the window to inspect the building across the way. "Now listen to me close, Skreen," he said. "I'm gonna be your spotter. When I tell you what window to get your sights on, you do it, just as quick as you can. The second you get Mr. Tom's head on top of that front sight, you mash the trigger just as quick and smooth and easy as you know how. My gun is zeroed in perfect for three hundred yards; there's no more wind outside than at the bottom of a coalmine; you got no outs if you miss. Understand?"

"I dig you, Sowbelly," Skreen said. "But look, I never cooled a cat before. I ain't sure I can do it."

"This ain't your first kill," Bailey said. "Think about that little girl you goosed out the window t' other night. Don't worry none. Just make like the man you see is a electric rabbit in a shooting-gallery, and you're hankering to get your girl one of them kewpie dolls."

Cozy minced into the bedroom carrying her steak sandwich. "If you'll pardon the expression, I ain't the type girl that walks into men's bedrooms and expects to find them laying around with guns," she said. "What I came in for was to see if you decided what you want me to do, Mr. Bailey."

Bailey lowered his binoculars to look at the girl. "What I want for you to do is easy. Just trot back out to the front room, turn all the lights on, and start walking around casual-like, in front of the window, taking off your clothes."

Cozy threw her sandwich down beside Skreen on the bed. "I didn't come here to be made sport of."

Bailey shrugged and returned his attention to the building across the playground. "Do like I say, honey. If it makes you feel better you can turn on the radio. The other way, you'd just be undressing; with music on I guess it's a art-form." He thrust two fingers into the breast pocket of his overalls and, without looking at it, flipped Cozy a folded bill. "There's your pay. Now let's have the show."

Cozy picked up the bill. When she'd unfolded it enough to read the 100's on the corners, she hurried out onto her stage without further protest. She clicked on the radio and the lights—it was twilight-dark outside—and kicked off her shoes. In the bedroom, Sowbelly Bailey played his binoculars over the face of the building that held Cozy's prospective audience. Skreen, glancing down at the bed, saw the steak sandwich Cozy had abandoned beside him. Checking to make sure Bailey was preoccu-

pied with his spotter's duties, Skreen picked up the sandwich and began, cautiously, to work through it. He was kind of hungry after all, with all this excitement. "Just get the critter's head splotch in the middle of the sights and mash the trigger like you was fond of it," Bailey said, his voice a coaching, coaxing murmur. "Keep ready, Skreen. That Tom fellow is bound to poke his head out in the open to see the show."

Skreen finished the sandwich, swallowed the last of the steak with a microscopic movement of his Adam's apple, careful that the sound didn't give him away to Bailey. He glanced out of the tail of his eye to see how Cozy was doing in the next room. Real well, he decided, grinning and giving his full attention to her. That little chick was heaped something terrible, and more of her all-over tan was showing by the minute. She strutted an arc in front of the window, dropping a bit of cloth here, a bit there, humming accompaniment to the radio's music. "Boy, I don't want to hear you breathing deep!" Bailey snapped without looking away from the binoculars. "Keep your mind on that gun you're looking through. I think we got us a nibble. See that window directly across, one story up? The one with the yellow-colored curtains blowing out? I saw someone kind of push against the curtains. Get your sights on that window."

Skreen glanced over the rifle to find his way, then picked up the window, a box balanced on the bead of the front sight, framed in the peephole of the rear sight. "Yeah, man," he said. "I could pick off a spider's earlobes with this giz."

"Shut up and squeeze away the slack on the trigger," Sowbelly said. "One shot, General Grant; that's all you got." The yellow curtain across the way parted. "Get him!" Bailey shouted at the instant the rifle fired.

"Got him!" Skreen yelled, dropping the rifle and bounding up from the bed. "Did you dig the face on that cat?"

"Ugliest one I ever did see," Bailey said. "Had a face like a busted fist." He stood and tucked his binoculars back into their leather holster.

"But I got him," Skreen boasted.

"You sure enough did," Bailey agreed.

The two men walked out into the living room, Skreen carrying the rifle as proudly as though he were parading for another marksman's medal. He leaned the rifle against the sofa. Cozy, stripped to her brassiere and a lace breechclout, was frozen midway in her dance across the window. Suddenly she came to life again, grabbing up her purse and a double handful of clothes from the floor and running toward the door.

"Get dressed first," Skreen said.

"You ain't decent." Cozy fought the latch free, and was out in the hall before he could stop her. Skreen chuckled. "There goes a chick with a bad set of nerves."

There was a click as Sowbelly Bailey closed the bolt of the rifle on a fresh cartridge. He poked the muzzle of the gun against Skreen's spine. "How are your nerves, Skreen?" he asked.

"Mean, man," Skreen laughed. "I'm like ice, Sowbelly—dry ice. I'm cold, I burn, and when I'm gone there's nothing to show I was there. Now stop messing with my backbone, will you?"

"I don't aim to mess with it much," Bailey said. "I only want to find out if you'd druther be blew in two, or splattered on cement."

Skreen stopped smiling. "Man, what you gaining trying to cool me?" he asked. "I'm the hottest peddler the organization's got, picking up fresh meat right and left, recruiting new pushers."

"I'm sick and tired of you fouling up all the time," Bailey said. "And my troops are tired of dumping all the bad boys you can't handle. Now you gonna walk out that window friendly-like, or do I got to blast you through it?"

Skreen stepped toward the open window. He began to raise his hands. "Sowbelly buddy, you're twitching wild," he said. "Lay down that crazy gun and I'll make as if you didn't go nuts."

"March, little soldier," Bailey said.

Skreen's hands came level with his shoulders. Without a flicker of warning he flipped to the right, banging his elbow against the muzzle of the Remington. He spun on his right foot, facing Bailey, and snaked his right arm under the rifle and over Bailey's left wrist, grabbing his other hand where it gripped the stock. Pulling with his left hand, shoving down hard with all the strength of his right, Skreen forced Bailey against the window-sill. He tugged the rifle free and tossed it back into the room. Bailey kicked toward Skreen's belly. Skreen twisted, grabbed hold of the flying instep, and flipped Sowbelly Bailey out the window. Three flowerpots went with him.

Bailey went down like a bomb, head-first and screaming. "Luckier than the girl was," Skreen said. "He's got his flowers already." He picked up the rifle and ejected the cartridge. "Dumb hoosier wouldn't believe I fired good rifle," he murmured. "Probably wouldn't believe I was hot on that unarmed defense jazz, except I showed him." He picked up the three flowerpots that remained on the window-ledge and dumped the geraniums and soil onto the carpet to pick out the decks of H. He took the heroin to the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet, flushing three times to make sure that this evidence was

really gone. Nothing he could do now about the Horse in the busted flowerpots down on the playground, beside Sowbelly's body.

Shouts were drifting up now. Bailey's screams had brought people from the lower apartments on both sides of the playground. "Better clear this scene," Skreen told himself. He glanced around. All he really needed were his lockbox keys, safe on his keychain. There was nothing else here he couldn't easier buy somewhere else than take with him. Travel light, he thought, only carry money.

He'd just put his hand to the door-latch when the phone rang. Skreen sweated out four rings without moving, then ran to the phone and grabbed it up. "What you want?" he demanded.

"Congratulations, old man!" Tom said. "A magnificent job! I'll tell you frankly, Mr. Skreen, I've watched a lot of people through these old binoculars of mine, but you're unique."

"How bad you hurt?" Skreen asked, sitting on the edge of the telephone table and holding the phone with both hands.

"Hurt? I? Not a bit of it," Tom assured him. "Perfect health! But how kind of you to inquire."

"Damn it, I shot you! I saw you slump down onto the floor," Skreen insisted.

"Perfectly natural mistake, old man," Tom said. "I was out of my flat for a moment. You shot my companion."

"That ugly so-so?" Skreen demanded.

"Please control your language," Tom said. "Blouzalind was a lady, a lovely lady, a prize Boxer bitch. I'll rather miss her, you know. But that's another matter entirely. I must congratulate you on your rifle marksmanship, Mr. Skreen. You caught her square between the eyes."

"We had steaks frying here," Skreen said. "Your dog must have smelled them, and come to the window."

"Quite likely," Tom agreed. "Blouzalind was a bit greedy. Well, I've enjoyed our little conversation, Mr. Skreen."

"You ain't gonna hit me for that money?" Skreen asked.

"Heavens, no!" Tom said. "You're far too dangerous a man for me to do business with. Let's just forget the whole matter, shall we?"

"Crazy by me," Skreen said, grinning. He glanced back over his shoulder. Somebody was messing around outside his door.

"Fine," Tom said. "I'd best ring off now; I've chatted quite long enough. You see, Mr. Skreen, I telephoned the police just before I called you. You could pay me off for simple murder, old man, or even two of them; but for killing my dog I'll see you hang. Cheerio!"

by O. H. Leslie

YOU'LL BE SORRY WHEN I'M DEAD

Little girls are not made of sugar and spice and everything nice. This rumor was started by a little girl who was made of all the things that little girls are really made of. A big percentage of any decent little girl consists of lies—untruths, if you want to be kind; fantasy, if you want to be psychological. Still—somehow—they are wonderful.

IN THE southeast corner of the attic, where the light from the dormer window fell across her writing paper, Susie moistened the tip of her stubby pencil. Her high white brow rippled in thought, as she searched her ten-year-old's vocabulary for the proper salutation to the letter she was beginning. Finally, she decided upon a straight-forward "Dear Mr. Hudson," and laboriously scrawled the words on top of the page.

She wasn't sure that it was right, burdening Rock Hudson with her own family problems. The girls she knew at school would simply gush in admiration, or ask for pictures and autographs. But Susie's letter would be different, and serious in its purpose.

Dear Mr. Hudson, Will you please help me? I live at 80 East Elm Avenue, Mount Colony, New York. My stepfather is a brute. He beats my mother drinks and curses and once he broke her wrist. He hits me sometimes too, once I was so black and blue I couldn't go to school because of it. I know how busy you are but

Somewhere in the house, a screen door slammed. The commonplace sound jolted her into reality, and made Susie look at her written words with the sudden realization that they would mean nothing to the shadow-man who moved heroically across the screen of the Beacon Theatre in Mount Colony. But she reviewed her fantasy again, her

visions of the sleek black automobile pulling into her driveway, and Rock Hudson, looking grim and determined, coming up to the front door, preparing to liberate Susie and her suffering mother. She saw his face clearly, a good, warm face, full of strength and kindness. Sometimes, she confused it with the face of Uncle Harold, except that Uncle Harold wasn't nearly so good-looking. He wasn't really her Uncle, but he was her mother's closest friend, maybe her *only* friend, and once, when Susie's stepfather had gotten raging drunk and abusive, they had both packed up and gone to Uncle Harold's cabin in the Poconos, where Uncle Harold lived all summer as something-or-other for the Park Department. That had been Susie's most memorable summer, but it didn't last very long. She had heard her mother and Uncle Harold talking one night, in low tones, mostly about money, and the next thing she knew, they were back at the big colonial house on Elm Avenue . . .

Susie looked at the letter in her lap, with the tolerant, slightly amused eyes of an adult. Then she tore the page into small scraps. Rock Hudson wasn't going to rescue her mother and herself from the tweed-suited monster who lived there; she knew that with cold certainty. She felt grown-up, wiser, in the few minutes which had just passed.

She went downstairs. Bella, the maid, was coming out of her mother's bedroom, and when she saw Susie, the fat old hen started to cluck. "Just *look* at the dust on that dress; your mother's going to give you a good lickin'."

"She is *not,*" Susie said defiantly, tossing her thin golden hair.

"Yeah, well she better not see you that way. I know where you been, up in that dirty old attic again, doin' God knows what."

"What's wrong, Bella?" Susie's mother appeared midway up the staircase. "What's Susie done?"

"You ask her, Mrs. Grayson, I ain't no stool-pigeon."

Grumbling, the old woman went about her duties, and Susie's mother said, "What is it, Susie? Where have you been all afternoon?"

"I—I was just writing a letter."

"Who were you writing to?"

"I can't tell you."

Her mother's face, the loveliest, saddest face in the whole world, looked inexplicably angry.

"You're getting to be a sullen, stubborn girl. Now answer me, Susie. Who were you writing to?"

"To Uncle Harold!" Susie blurted out.

Her mother's reaction was startling. She caught Susie's arm and dragged her into the bedroom, slamming the door after them.

"Don't ever mention him here!" she said, in a savage whisper. "I told you never to talk about Harold! Your father'd be furious."

Susie's eyes filled with tears. "But I thought he was your *friend—*"

"Give me that letter, Susie."

"I—I tore it up."

"What did you say? What were you telling Harold?"

"I was telling him about—about Mr. Grayson. About how he gets drunk and hits you—"

"Oh, Susie!"

"I wanted him to help us!" Susie sobbed, finding relief in tears. "I wanted him to come and save us!"

Suddenly, her mother's arms were surrounding her, engulfing her in maternal warmth. She didn't say anything more, giving herself over completely to the joyful moment. Her mother held her until the tears stopped, and she felt drowsy.

"You just don't understand these things, Susie. When you get older, maybe you will. Mr. Grayson isn't a bad man; he has a kind of sickness, that's all it is—"

"I hate him!"

"Susie, Susie," her mother said. "You mustn't talk like that, not ever. And you must never mention Harold again. Is it a promise? Will you do it for Mother?"

"All right," Susie murmured sleepily, the last sob escaping her throat. "All right, Mother . . ."

That night, listening in the darkness of her bedroom to the cricket which had made its home on her window sill, she became aware of voices downstairs.

She hopped out of bed and went to the door, but the sounds she heard weren't words, only melodies. One was an angry, unlovely tune, in the gutteral baritone of her stepfather; the other was the low-pitched placating lilt of her mother's voice. She opened the door a crack.

". . . stupid accusations," her mother was saying. "It's only when you're like this that you say such things; you'll be sorry tomorrow."

"Stop begging me to hit you, Laura! Think I don't know what you're doing? You *want* me to hit you. So you can feel real good and justified—so you can run off with that nature-loving friend of yours again—"

There was a cry from her mother. With a moan, Susie came out of the bedroom and ran to the landing of the stairway.

"Stop it!" she screamed. "Stop it!"

For a moment, there was only silence. Then *he* appeared, still wearing a topcoat with a white silk scarf loose around his beefy neck. His big red face was flushed, the thin patches of gray hair disordered on his head. He looked up the stairs and grinned.

"So little Miss Fix-It's awake?" he said thickly. "Go on back to bed, Susie; this a grown-up party."

"You leave her alone! You leave my mother alone!"

He stomped his foot thunderously on the first step of the stairway, pretending to lunge towards her. He laughed when Susie

whirled in panic and scurried back to the bedroom.

Inside, she threw herself across the bed and pulled the pillows over her head.

"You'll be sorry," she muttered, in a shaking voice, her teeth clenched so hard they hurt. "You'll be sorry when I'm dead . . ."

She had set the theme for the night's fantasy. She saw the scene clearly, as if framed within a television screen. Her mother, tragically lovely in black, sobbing uncontrollably before a pathetic small coffin. Bella, the maid, grief-stricken, pleading forgiveness from the silent, dead child. Behind them, her friends from school, sobbing and sniffling, secretly envious. And most important of all, Mr. Grayson, her stepfather, trembling and white-faced, mouthing again and again his own condemnation: "What have I done? What have I done? It's my fault; I'm the one to blame . . ."

Normally, Susie slid easily from her bedtime fantasies into sleep. Now she remained awake, too stirred by the vision of her own burial scene. Death was an abstract, adult thing, yet Susie thought of Death now, and the thought was sweet. "He'll be sorry," she whispered. "They'll *all* be sorry . . ."

Comforted by the thought, she fell asleep.

The next day was Saturday. She spent the rainy morning in the attic's secret corner, composing beautifully-worded suicide notes. Finally, she decided upon one that was brief and to the point. She would leave the house at dusk, and walk slowly down the pathway towards the river which wound half a mile from Elm Avenue. And then . . .

She placed the note beneath the runner of her dressing table, and went downstairs for one final look at her mother.

But she wasn't there. She found Bella in her room, and learned that her mother had gone into town on some errand. Bella was getting dressed herself; it was her day-and-a-half off, and she was taking the four o'clock train into the city. "You won't be alone, though," she said spitefully. "Your father's in the study."

"He's *not* my father," Susie said.

When the maid left, and she was alone in the house with Mr. Grayson, Susie felt a peculiar sense of calm. She no longer feared him; there was nothing he could do to hurt her now.

When six o'clock came, she began to worry. If it got much later, she couldn't go through with her plan; she could find no excuse for leaving the house after dark. She would have to go soon, now. She'd just have to miss seeing her mother.

She started up the stairs, and heard her stepfather's voice behind her.

"Susie?"

She turned and looked at him.

He was wearing a black velvet smoking jacket with red trim, and small rimless spectacles that made him look old and harmless.

"Susie, I'm sorry about last night . . ."

"I hate you," she said softly.

"Don't talk that way. You know how I am when I'm . . . sick."

"I wish you were really sick," she said, feeling elated and reckless. "I wish you were so sick you died."

His face changed, reddened, hardened. It was even more frightening because he was sober, because he was rational—

"You little bitch," he whispered. "You rotten little bitch . . ."

"Leave me alone!" Susie shrieked, and scrambled up the stairs, certain that he was after her again. She slammed the door of her room behind her, panting, listening. When she heard nothing, she went to the dressing table and found the suicide note. She read it again, and a new, better version came into her mind. She tore the note into the tiniest possible shreds; then she sat down and wrote a new farewell.

My stepfather hates me. He is going to kill me. He said he is going to take me to the river and drown me like a cat. Don't let him get away with murder.

She underlined the last word three times, and then examined the note until she was sure it would do. She placed it carefully on her pillow and went to the closet. She put her red-rubber rainboots over her shoes, her best plaid scarf around her neck, a beret on her head. Then she put on the blue spring coat with the shiny brass buttons, and went to the door.

As she tiptoed down the stairs, she caught a glimpse of her stepfather in the living room. He was at the bar, beginning another sodden night. Then she hurried past the swinging door of the pantry, and out of the back entrance to the street.

It was a long walk to the river, and by the time she saw the still, placid waters reflecting the orange glow of the setting sun, she was becoming more and more uncertain of her plan. It was one thing to visualize the grief her death would cause; it was another to know that she would be unable to witness it. If she could only be *sure* there was a Heaven, where she could scan the earth below with high-powered binoculars . . . But Susie wasn't sure. She paused on the bank of the river, and felt doubt. What if Death meant only darkness, oblivion?

She shivered, and put one finger in the water. It was cold.

If she started slowly, she thought, a bit at a time . . . She took off her beret and threw it on the water. It floated downstream, a boat with a pom-pom funnel. Then she re-

moved her scarf and boots and did the same. She took off her topcoat, and flung it as far as she possibly could.

Then she walked hesitantly down the bank.

The moment the water lapped at her ankles, she screamed and stumbled back to safety. The river had seemed to clutch at her, with a million icy fingers. It was horrible. Death was horrible!

This came as a revelation, as a shock. She put her hand to her heart, and felt the beating, gratefully. Then she turned and fled from the threat that was the river, the blackness that was Death.

Staggering, she walked on the path that led home. But she knew she couldn't go there; she couldn't face him *now*. He would be ugly with drink. He would be awful . . . No, Susie thought. She would go to town. It was only a short walk, and she could spend the evening in the sanctity of the movie theatre. Then, when it was really dark, she could slip into the house unnoticed, through the back door . . .

It was only when she saw the yellow marquee lights of the Beacon that she realized she had no money. But there was still a way. She remembered it from that long-ago when she had been seven or eight, and had learned the secret of free admission to the theatre, through the open, unguarded alleyway door.

She took a seat in the rear, and saw the new Rock Hudson picture through twice.

When it was time to go home, the darkness was deeper than she had ever known it. She walked rapidly, until she saw the big white house on the hill, its windows bright.

She shut the screen door quietly behind her. The pantry was dark, and there were voices heard faintly behind the swinging door.

She put her ear to the wood, and listened.

"But it's crazy, absolutely crazy!" her stepfather was saying, his voice blurred by drink. "I didn't touch the stupid brat—"

A voice answered, and Susie was startled to hear its deep masculine tones.

"Then how do you explain the note your wife found, Mr. Grayson? And how do you explain these? Her hat, her scarf, her coat . . . You do recognize them, don't you?"

"Susie!" her mother's voice cried out, in anguish. "Oh, Susie!"

She wanted to burst through the swinging door, throw herself into her mother's arms and shout, "I'm all right, Mother, I'm all right!" But fear held her rooted; she couldn't face her stepfather, or the hard-voiced stranger who was asking him the incisive questions—

"Yes, of course I recognize them. They're Susie's, all right, but I swear to God I never—"

"We won't continue this any longer, Mr. Grayson. I think maybe

it would be best if you came with us."

"But I never touched the brat! Laura, for God's sake, make them believe me—"

Susie put her hands over her ears.

When she took them away, there was silence.

She opened the door a fraction. Outside, on the driveway, she heard an auto engine, and the crunch of wheels on gravel. She waited, holding her breath. Then she opened the door wider.

"Mother . . ." she whispered.

Somehow, the scream didn't escape her mother's open mouth. Her mother clapped her hand across it, and then opened her arms and welcomed Susie into their maternal warmth.

"Oh, Susie, Susie," she murmured. "Where have you been? How could you frighten us this way?"

"I'm sorry, Mother, I'm sorry," Susie sobbed. "I thought I really could do it, jump in the river . . . so they'd think *he* was the one that did it . . ."

Her mother pushed her away, examining the tear-stained face incredulously.

"Susie, how could you think of such a thing!"

"I hate him! I hate him!"

"Hush!" her mother said, drawing her close again.

They remained that way for almost a minute. Then her mother wiped the dirt and tears from her cheeks, and took her by the hand.

"Now you come with me," she said, leading her to the stairway. "You come with me and do exactly what I tell you to do."

They went up the steps, past the bedroom floor, up to the attic door.

"You like the attic, don't you, Susie?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Wouldn't you like to stay up here, even sleep here, just for a little while?"

Susie's eyes shone. "Oh, yes, Mother!"

"And then, in a day or so, how would you like to go and visit Uncle Harold, in the Poconos? All by yourself?"

"Oh, Mother!" Susie shrieked in delight.

Her mother's arms enfolded her again. "You'll have a wonderful summer," she crooned. "And then later, I'll come and join you. Later . . ." She cleared her throat. "Did anybody see you, Susie? After you left the house? Anybody at all?"

"No, Mother."

"My good little girl," her mother said, rocking her back and forth. "My good little baby . . ."

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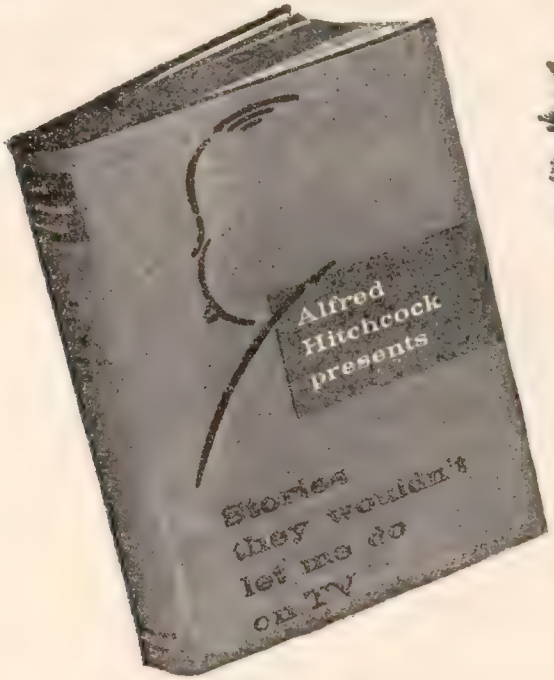

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RIGHT PLACE TO DIE

by Bryce Walton

AS A SUCCESSFUL ATTORNEY AT LAW, Paul Linderman sometimes found the capsuled world in which he lived unendurable. Its Philistine grossness, power-lust, money-lust and greed would begin to overwhelm him, threaten him with contagious cynicism like a plague. Then he would run away for a few days to the small cabin in the woods overlooking the Mississippi.

His father had often brought him here as a boy but he had never called it running away; it was a place where you could walk and lie alone, commune with nature, reacquaint yourself with what you really were. Return to yourself, so to speak.

Linderman would dress in old faded khakis and boots, take up the ancient 30-30 Winchester his father had gotten him for Christmas twenty-five years ago, and then he would walk in the woods, along the bluffs above the massive quiet flowing of the river. He would walk past places he remembered, quiet lonely places, and sometimes sit on that knoll above the river where he had once sat and read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* which was as near as he had ever gotten to such a perfect dream-like adventure.

He never hunted anything with the gun, but would occasionally take desultory pot-shots at something inanimate, although even the sound of a gunshot seemed inappropriate to his purpose here.

Today, there was something clear and pure, almost dreamlike, in the warm, early autumn air. Linderman felt the noon sun burning through his damp shirt as he climbed the steep bluff, penetrating thick brush, feeling the tang of crushed weed smells and dust in his nose. The old fence climbed the bluff precariously, its weather-beaten poles at odd angles as Linderman followed it up toward a grove of cottonwoods.

There was a secret place in the grove where he had often lain as a boy, and where he had once felt that he knew himself and what he was and where he really wanted to go and why. Linderman stood the Winchester against the fence post and began the risky business of crawling between the strands of barbed wire. A barb caught in the back of his shirt. He smiled as he twisted his arm up to extricate himself, just as he had done so many times before, feeling a sense of satisfaction in this basic simple problem.

At this moment he heard a quick scuttling in the thick brush, sug-

The chase story is a story in which a chase occurs. I'm sure that this bit of erudition will overwhelm no one. You may, however, not realize that in this age of jet propulsion, pursuit has lost the intimacy of two individuals going round and round after one another in a revolving door. I am therefore happy to say, that in our story the pursuer is good old-fashioned Death.

by Bryce Walton

gesting the sudden rush of a big panicked animal. Raising his head, he saw a man he vaguely recognized as Lloyd Maule picking up the rifle. Maule backed away a few steps and grinned in a sweaty, feverish way as he leveled the gun at Linderman.

Linderman heard the voice wheezing something to the effect that he should get ready to die. But it hardly seemed real to Linderman, as if this were one of those convenient little fantasies he had cooked up for himself here when he was a kid. One of those mythological daydreams of adolescence in which a pure vicious villain is created in order to be exorcised in a burst of heroic violence.

But this was somewhat different, he realized. Maule was the stuff of which real-life villians are often made, squat, rather fat, gross, and exuding a sordid sickness. Conquering such an image would hardly make anyone a hero. And in any case, Linderman was in no position to fulfill an adolescent fantasy—bent double and trapped in the steel nets of a fence, barbed like a helpless fish. The feel of the barb against his back ran like a tentacle of fear and hooked in his heart.

Realizing Linderman's helplessness, Maule shuffled close and the rifle barrel angled menacingly at his stomach.

"You want to talk a little, Mr. Linderman. You're such a good talker. Go on, make with the mouth if you want."

Sweat ran into Linderman's eyes now as Maule's figure blurred slightly. His legs and back began to ache with the cramped strain of his position, but he knew that if he moved Maule would shoot him —not later, but right now. And later, even if it were inevitable, was better than now.

Now he remembered that he had sent Lloyd Maule up for a ten-year stretch, and it seemed so long ago. Linderman had served for two years in Minneapolis as an Assistant Prosecuting Attorney. He hadn't wanted to do it, but had been persuaded into it by his wife and others, because it was supposed to mean more prestige, a step up the social totem pole. He had no heart for convicting people. He preferred to defend people and win acquittals. His conscience had been sopped by the fact that, in Minnesota there is no capital punishment; only life-imprisonment. Still, after two years he had dropped back to private practice.

But you couldn't drop back to a time before Lloyd Maule had been prosecuted and condemned as a sex deviant and attempted rapist. Not that Linderman's conscience bothered him now. He had made it a religious point never to prosecute a man without first being absolutely certain of his guilt. There was no doubt about Maule's sordid, sick personality, nor of his life's

record as a deviant, a freak, something condemned at birth to lurk on the fringes of decent society.

"Didn't think you'd wanta talk out here, Mr. Linderman. Nothin to say, nobody to listen to your smart talk. Do you no good, would it?"

Maule was right, of course. Maule's long-held grudge, his obviously long watching and waiting, his having followed Linderman out here and tailed him all morning through the woods, left no doubt about the implacability of Maule's purpose.

"Not smiling either, are you, Mr. Linderman? Grinning at me, guess that's what really done it. Up until then I didn't hardly know you from the others. But then when they convicted me you looked at me and grinned."

Linderman didn't remember that.

"Like I was nothin, just nothin, like you was so big and smart and had all the say-so, Mr. Linderman. Like as if I couldn't ever do nothin. I killed a man once before though. It was easy then and it's a lot easier now. Bet you wouldn't guess I'd killed a man. Nobody else knows. They hanged somebody else for it, but that was way back. Guess you could say I killed two of 'em."

Maule laughed with a sort of nervous eagerness, then looked quickly around as if concerned about witnesses.

"I've watched you for over two months I guess, Mr. Linderman. I've been careful too. Going to the probation officer and being a good boy all the time. Wait as long as I have and a few more months don't make much difference, do they?"

"I'll say this," Linderman said. "You won't get away with it. They'll tie it up—you're getting out of the pen, and—"

"I've been careful. I even got a perfect alibi set up so I ain't even here. And anyway I didn't just get out, Mr. Linderman. That pen's too crowded. They got rid of me early. I been out over six months now already."

Maule levered a shell into the chamber. The metallic click registered with a deadly finality in Linderman's head. He shifted his weight a bit, got one leg braced under him as he looked straight down the fence row, down the steep bluff through curtains of still brush. Somewhere down there he heard the faint but heavy rolling of the river.

"You got a minute or two, Mr. Linderman. Maybe you want to say a prayer, something like that."

Hopelessness, a blurring leaden futility drained Linderman of purpose and will and for a moment he seemed to hang there on the barbed wire like one of those ragged photographs from World War I. A dragonfly whirred a few inches from his head as if he no longer symbolized a threat, and the sun glared down on his back and burned into his neck.

"You grinned like I was stupid," Maule said. He balanced the rifle in his right hand, his finger over the trigger, and took a dirty handkerchief from the pocket of his baggy slacks and wiped at his splotched face. "I ain't stupid, Mr. Linderman. I waited. Nothin doing I said unless it's just right. And it's just right. You know that Mr. Linderman?"

It wasn't far down the steep fall into concealing brush, Linderman thought with a sick futile longing. And then it was a hundred feet or so down to the river. There was the soggy raft down there tied in the mud. Some kids had probably built it.

"You being a big smart lawyer, Mr. Linderman, you ought to know how it's right. You crawl through a fence and shoot yourself. It's an accident. They happen all the time. But what if something happens and they pin it on me anyway, like they do, like you know they always do, Mr. Linderman? What then? Well, this is Minnesota, and the worst they can do is send me up for life. It ain't so bad in there anyway. It wasn't that. Like I said, it was the grin."

What the hell was it with this grin, Linderman thought. He wouldn't have consciously grinned at Maule who, at the time, had seemed a sick, sorry wretch. Maybe Maule had only imagined it. Maybe Linderman had been grinning, but at something remote from that courtroom and everything it stood for.

But then what could it possibly matter now?

Then, glancing at Maule's dull undeveloped face, abnormally lighted up by the roiled emotions of the moment, he knew why Maule was prolonging this thing. Maule wanted satisfaction, wanted Linderman to play some demanded role, perhaps to scream for mercy, beg, grovel, fall into the subservience that would make even the slug-like Maule feel momentarily superior.

Then a surge of solid, pinpointed purpose pumped strength and vitality up through the dry wick of Linderman's body. That he could avoid being shot was extremely doubtful. But that his death should give satisfaction to this subhuman slug, this diseased, splotched, totally useless creature—that was unthinkable. Linderman had tried to live decently, morally, had done his best and had never been satisfied with his best. That all those years should go merely to afford a momentary sordid triumph for this lump of retarded clay was unbearable.

Linderman decided what he would do, what he would insist to himself, no matter what, that he do. And silently he did offer up into himself a kind of prayer, a humanistic prayer calling on all the potential within himself to enable him to carry out his resolve.

As he lunged, he felt the barb tear through the taut tendons of his back and heard the whining rip of cloth. He was also grinning at Maule whose face responded instantaneously with bestial hate.

The explosion seemed to spit directly into Linderman's face, but he felt it in his belly, a hot bitter slicing of death, dulled before it reached true consciousness and registering more as a sharp, harmless blow with a hard fist.

Then Linderman was clear of the fence and trying to kick his paralyzed weight up off his hands and knees and clawing at the rich loam and fallen leaves.

He wanted to scream in defiance of his impotence and failure. Putting one hand under him, he felt his life thick and hot running out of his guts. He pressed it back in, keeping his hand flat over what he knew was a fatal wound, and feeling the desperate pumping throb of his life trying to bypass the sudden and unexplainable leak.

"I coulda shot you in the head," Maule yelled. Dimly Maule was to be seen squatting on his heels, partly concealed by brush. He had tossed the rifle near the fence, but he was nearer to it than Linderman was and would have all the advantage in that direction. No, Linderman had to force himself to roll down the incline into the brush to the river. Gravity was with him, if he could only get a start.

"It's more like an accident, you gettin' it in the belly," Maule said. His dull eyes seemed to bulge now, resembled an insect's or some vile tube being squeezed. And he made a little pleasurable sucking sound, while spittle ran from the corner of his fish-like mouth. "It'll take awhile. I can watch. It can take quite awhile for a man to die when he's shot in the belly. I remember that from the war."

At that moment, a pure ballooning hatred stirred in Linderman's paralysis, and, supported on his knees and one hand, he quivered with it. He had never felt this direct, unalleviated hatred. But perhaps it had always been there. As a result, he felt very little pain. And he also recalled that even a critical stomach wound sometimes was relatively painless. In any case, he lost all awareness of the fact—which moments before he had regarded as fact—that he was already a dead man. His all-pervading purpose returned in a concentrated roar as if he had gotten a sudden hypo injection directly into his bloodstream.

Again he felt only the terrible injustice of his own life's end serving merely to gratify and assist in the continued existence of a useless perverted wretch such as Lloyd Maule.

Linderman's legs snapped out straight with a galvanic suddenness like a frog's, hurled him out and dropped him like a stone through crashing walls of brush.

He rolled, pushed, jerked to keep on falling, totally oblivious to any further meaningless threats to life and limb. Minor mishaps could hardly matter when you were virtually dead.

His only objective now was just to stay alive long enough to die in the correct locale. To live only long enough so that, in dying, he frustrated Lloyd Maule and condemned him to the final hell which he so thoroughly deserved.

Something blocked his downward plunge. He dug at the knob of brush, then was again rolling and diving, feeling exaltation in the efficacy of his own weight, as if a hurtling stone should become conscious of its leaden power.

Then he caught again, his body wrapped about the trunk of a willow like a length of wet string. As he tried to work his legs up and around so he could continue to fall, he heard Maule's body crashing after him, and Maule's high treble yell.

"Don't run away, Linderman! Please—you're dead. There's no sense in—What's the sense in it?"

You'll find out, Linderman thought with snarling relish. You'll find out, you loathesome pig, because I'm dying trying.

He slid down a grassy trough made slick by the water from a small spring. His outstretched hand touched the cooling muddy water of the Mississippi and he saw the blurred line of a double barge seeming to drift effortlessly down the afternoon sun.

Nature could be cruel and heartless, Linderman thought. She could be kind and cooperative, too, when you were close to her. It required no effort to fall with the force of gravity, or drift on the flowing current of her rivers.

He crawled and fell, got to his hands and knees and then collapsed breathing painfully near the raft. He heard a shrill outcry of rage from Maule who had probably also spotted the raft.

"Linderman—what's the sense in it? Stop, Linderman!"

Linderman suppressed a groan as he dragged his way through slimy mud inch-by-inch toward the raft. He felt terribly weak, but there was a peculiar lack of pain in his punctured belly, and he was grateful also for this further act of cooperation and consideration on the part of nature. But she giveth and she taketh away, he thought, for he was beginning to wonder if he had enough strength to make it.

Then the touch of the raft sparked renewed energy from the coals of hatred in him and he worked his body into a spring-like curve, heels dug into the mud, his shoulders braced against the raft. The raft was half out of water. It was heavy, some ten by five feet in size, and water-logged. The mud gripped it with black, leech-like greed.

He heard a scream from Maule, then a rolling crash, and the impact of Maule hitting the river. Linderman laughed, but his indrawn gasp caught at the muscles of his stomach and tears streamed down his face and mixed with sweat and mud. He bit his lips.

Maule screamed through the curtaining trees like a petulant frustrated kid. "Stop running, stop it—" And like a kid, holding back, fearful of the bloody spectre before him.

Linderman strained against the raft like a breaking bow. And then the raft moved, made a violent protest of sucking at the mud. Linderman's feet slipped. His body shot full length and lay quivering with impotence. But he heaved again, using both hands now, and seeing his blood gush into the mud.

The raft shot out into the water. Linderman squirmed after it, holding one hand over his stomach and lunging outward until the tip of his right hand clung to the rear of the raft.

As the current pulled the raft downstream toward the town of La Crosse, Linderman worked his way up onto it and then he looked back at the blurred drift of the shore.

Linderman managed a bloody grin as he saw Maule appear there, waving his arm and giving out with long, unintelligible yells.

Then Linderman lay flat on his back, both hands pressing his stomach. Later he tore strips from his shirt and, using his handkerchief as a compress, tied up his wound.

He fought against weakness, and a persisting feverish retreating of his consciousness. His mind drifted faster than the river, turned comatose. It was unreliable, not so strong as his will. But he concentrated on certain vital statistics, hoping they would so impress his unconscious mind that his will might guide him even though he lost conscious awareness completely.

It could work that way. Once he had played the last half of a football game, and played it well, without ever remembering having done it because he had a brain concussion. This memory gave him some hope.

He must remember that downstream was South, which meant that Wisconsin which bordered the river to the East would always be to the left of downstream, and that Minnesota would be to the right when facing downstream.

He must not go ashore on the East bank in Wisconsin, at least until he got down river as far as Dubuque. Dubuque was on the border line where Illinois and Wisconsin crossed the Mississippi. Below Dubuque, he could go ashore on either the Western or Eastern bank because then he would be in either Iowa or Illinois. On the other hand, if he knew he couldn't hold out long enough to reach Dubuque alive, he had to get below La Crosse

and concentrate on hitting the Western bank because only that way could he be absolutely certain that he was in Iowa. He could land in Iowa or Illinois. But he must avoid Minneapolis or Wisconsin.

He concentrated, simplified, capsuled. If you get below La Crosse you can go ashore on the Western bank. But not the Eastern bank until you pass Dubuque. After that, either shore will be most satisfactory.

A dull throbbing ache spread out through his body and seemed to penetrate his brain like a slow-working poison.

At night he lay in a feverish stupor staring at the hazy shifting lights of the stars. Sometimes they blinked off and on, as if they were bulbs, and someone was experimenting with a master lightswitch. He tried to yell for someone not to turn those lights off.

Leaves rustled as the raft curved in near the bank and under the leaves of overhanging willows. Owls who-whooed, and he heard a whippoorwill and a dog howling off in the night. Huck Finn had heard them too, once, he thought oddly.

In the light of the moon, Linderman saw a great deal of driftwood going by. The river was rising. A long, timbered island slipped past. It was dotted with lights and he could hear the muted sounds of music and happy voices. He was glad for the darkness. All afternoon he had seen the boats and barges, and had worried least someone might stop him, notice something wrong, and he might be too weak to tell them what he had to do. And even if he told them, they wouldn't believe him. They would think he was raving with fever. And they would probably take him ashore too soon.

He managed to dip river water up onto his face occasionally, and that way tried to keep himself awake, or from completely losing consciousness, both of which now amounted to the same thing. He was afraid that if he lost consciousness now, he would never get it back . . .

His eyes opened leadenly on a gray, feverish landscape. He forced his dim faculties to observe the big trees overhanging the river, the increasing light sifting through the leaves. He knew it was another morning, but he wasn't sure which morning. He only knew, dimly, that he was still alive. He doubted if he had drifted unconscious through another entire day and night.

He knew he was in the worst possible shape before he stopped caring altogether. He could feel the straining and skipping of his heart and his inflamed and feverish face. When he tried to shift his body, a suppressed scream tore from his mouth and for a moment he lay fighting for great chunks of air. Then, remembering his purpose, a

calm determination returned to him.

River traffic was heavier. A barge drifted near him loaded with a line of boxcars. But no one seemed to pay any special attention to him, beyond idle curiosity, for he lay like someone merely lazing and drifting on a raft.

He tried to estimate how far he had drifted. He gazed at the bank whispering by in the rising sun, and figured his speed at about four, or five miles an hour. His watch had stopped, but he could estimate approximately how long he had been drifting and was certain that he must have passed La Crosse before dawn.

He was too far gone now, he knew, ever to hope to reach Dubuque. But if he was far enough below La Crosse, then Iowa was to his right and he ought to try to get ashore now, before it was too late even to make the attempt.

Barely able to twist his head, he saw a big bend approaching. The bending current should carry the raft, as it did that visible island of drift, near to the river's west bank under those high impressive bluffs.

Conserving his breath he waited, hardly daring to breath, think, or feel too much, for fear the effort would burn out the meager spark he had so far sustained.

As he approached the west bank, he saw corn-fields ahead and a patch of green pumpkins, and saw a boy running somewhere behind a frisking dog.

Then he was spinning round and down the big bend stern first, and forcing his arm to lift itself somehow toward the low overhanging willow branches. He grabbed one, felt it slip through nerveless fingers. He kept grabbing, clutching, until, almost as an act of reflex, muscles and tendons contracted and he was able to pull the raft to a stop. Then the current pushed him in among pieces of drift and into the bank.

Slowly, remaining on his back, moving only his arm, he managed to work the rotten rope around the willow branch. The river had risen. When it went down again, it would leave the raft and his body high and dry. He felt he would be found, if he could only hang on awhile longer. He could hear voices nearby, and the sound of an automobile. There were beercans up the bank, the signs of many campfires. There were abandoned bait cans, too, and he knew he was in a frequented spot.

When somebody finally did find him, he was still alive but only enough to enable him to see a blurred shadow bending over him, a shadow that was vaguely human and wavering with reflecting sharp flecks that seemed to be eyes. A voice reached him dimly. He was alive enough that he could say what he had to say. That he had been murdered, shot by Lloyd Maule. You understand? Lloyd

Maule. Repeat that. No, you'd better write it down. Lloyd Maule. And to say where he had been shot, why he had been shot, and that he had been dying as he drifted down the river to wherever he was now.

Alive enough to whisper, "Am I in Iowa now?"

"Yeah. Ain't far above Prarie du Chien."

But not alive enough to say any more. And the shadow bending over him spread out, grew darker. But alive enough to laugh last at Lloyd Maule.

In Iowa the punishment for murder was hanging. And beyond that were certain facts concerning legal jurisdiction. Linderman had traveled by river from the scene of his murder to the place of his dying, and thus the crime fell under the jurisdiction of the Laws of the Admiralty. And under the Laws of the Admiralty, a murderer is guilty where the act is culminated rather than where it is committed . . .

When Linderman opened his eyes in the hospital, they had a difficult time convincing him that he would probably live. The doctor and nurses assured him that there was no reason why he shouldn't, and every reason to be optimistic.

They gave him nembutal shots. He was catheterized. His chart was checked regularly and his blood pressure returned to nearly normal, but he was allowed no visitors, not even his wife.

He was kept under oxygen and immersed in a great deal of ice for a time. And he was given over 10,000 units of penicillin. A rubber tube ran from Linderman's nose to the bubbling jars of the Wangensteen above his head. A nurse would raise the bottles to increase the suction clearing poisons from Linderman's stomach.

Linderman was impressed, and finally it sank in that he hadn't been murdered after all.

"Stomach wounds are tricky, Linderman. No danger unless all of a sudden the infection travels. You're coming along fine. The miracle is though that excess bleeding didn't finish you before we got our hands on you."

Despite the rubber tube running from his nose, Linderman grinned. It was pure irony that his murderer had also been the goad that had made him stay alive. That had been no miracle. Hate had kept him alive. Pure primeval hatred. Something about Lloyd Maule's personality, too. You simply couldn't let such fellows get the upper hand.

by C. B. Gilford

MURDER and the Robot

Since a robot performs functions ordinarily ascribed to human beings, and operates with seemingly human intelligence, it stands to reason that they'd get around to being involved in murder. The robot of our story—George, by name—does more than clank, lumber about like King Kong, and announce whether Tweedledee or Tweedledum will be elected. He is a Bertrand Russell sort of robot; his concern is with morality and immorality, determining which is which. The insurance premium for such a robot is naturally even higher than it would be for a sword swallower. And compassion is most certainly his due.

"WHAT IS the old saying?" Marcus Troy asked suddenly. "Let George do it?"

"George?" I repeated. I was pretty blank at the moment.

"George is the name we gave our machine," he reminded me.

I stared at him without getting his drift. But then I was feeling kind of dense generally. I was sup-

posed to be a detective, my murder case was already two days old, and I hadn't progressed an inch toward solving it. The sheriff of Burton County had borrowed me all the way from Homicide in town and parked me here at Marcus Troy's palatial estate with the idea that I could find out who killed a fellow named Peter Banning.

"Let George do what?" I asked him.

"No slur intended, Mr. Nelson, but you do seem rather puzzled by our murder. Why not let the machine try to solve it?"

Marcus Troy was quite serious. He was a man almost fifty, not handsome, but pleasant looking. He was of ordinary height, maybe a bit stocky, but athletic and tanned, possibly because he had both indoor and outdoor swimming pools. Right now he was glowing with excitement.

Maybe I'd better make a point right here. He was not a "mad scientist." His gray hair was well tended, and he didn't wear thick-lensed glasses. He was just a very rich guy with a scientific hobby.

"Mr. Nelson," he said, "do you have any better ideas how to go about finding out who killed Banning?"

"Well no, I don't. But I still think I'm a better detective than a machine."

He smiled. He wasn't trying to be nasty. "Don't let pride stand in your way now, Mr. Nelson. Mathematicians and engineers have long since bowed to computing machines. Why not you detectives?"

I felt I had to stand up for my profession, even if I wasn't functioning as a very good representative of it. "We detectives deal with more than just facts," I said. "There's also the human element, the psychology, the intangible things like instinct and intuition . . ."

"You forget, Mr. Nelson, that George is not the usual electronic computer, the kind that forecasts election results or physical stresses in a bridge structure. I think George can handle the more subtle factors involved here. George wasn't built to solve murders, but it might adapt."

We sat together on the spacious terrace in the warm sun and watched the sailboats gliding out on the bay. Other items of scenery included Veronica, Marcus Troy's twenty-five-year-old blonde wife, right now sunning herself at the poolside about fifty yards off to our left. I could have hung around as a house guest at this place almost indefinitely. But I did have to get going on the case. And there was a funny gadget down in the big basement laboratory that maybe could help?

But it was ridiculous! A machine of all things . . .

"Let's put it this way, Nelson," Marcus Troy went on. "My point-of-view is this. I would like to

apprehend Peter's murderer. Peter and I may have had our little differences, but he was more responsible for George than anyone else. But principally, I suppose, I'm curious as to just what George can do. Now from your point-of-view, Nelson, it's really very simple. What can you lose?"

The big test was scheduled for that evening. We ate dinner as usual in the big dining room served by Rogers the butler. Marcus Troy presided at the head of the table in a white jacket. Veronica faced him from the foot of the table, in a strapless thing, white too, that contrasted beautifully with her tanned shoulders. She was a good-looker, blonde as I said, with green eyes. She made it hard for an impressionable guy like me to concentrate on the quail on my plate.

Across the table were my other two suspects, Clare Mesger and Steve Antal. If there was a "mad scientist" type in this group, it would have been this Antal. He was one of the team Troy had gathered together to work on George. But whereas Peter Banning—judging from the corpse and from pictures—had been the young college boy genius sort, handsome and cultured, this Antal seemed to own a dull razor and no comb. With ten bath tubs and two pools around the place, he still looked almost verminous. "Absent-minded and engrossed in his work," Troy had said.

This was a real place for opposites, all right. Banning and Antal. And Veronica Troy and Clare Mesger. This Mesger gal was a type I'd never met, or if so, I'd never noticed. Troy had found her working at some big industrial laboratory, and I guess if you're going to bring in a woman genius to work with men geniuses, the sexless kind like her is the best kind. She was tall and not badly built except on too large a scale. Six feet at least. She wore her dark, lusterless hair pulled back and tied like a woman in a Russian factory. Her face was flat and placid, completely devoid of expression. "She's always thinking, never feels any emotion," Troy had said.

I tried to watch all of them, not just Veronica. It was a queer outfit, no doubt about that. Marcus Troy, rich as Midas himself, marries a beauty queen from the wrong side of the tracks. She's a hobby I could give full-time attention to. But not Marcus. He's got an idea for a thinking machine he'd like to have, only there aren't any such machines. So he has to build it, and that takes scientific brains. He finds three of them, brings them home to his basement laboratory, and they build a machine called George. Then one night down in the lab, one of the scientific brains gets conked with a blunt instrument, identity unknown. Add a city de-

tective to the menagerie. One with almost no brain at all, because he can't find the murderer. And now the topper. Enter another detective. A brain this time, yes. A mechanical brain. George.

I woke up from my pre-occupation just in time to hear Marcus Troy say, "We've something on the program for this evening, folks. You'll be interested in this, Steve and Clare. And Veronica darling, I hope you'll bear with the rest of us. But I had a stupendous idea this afternoon. I want to give George the job of solving Pete's murder."

The two scientists came alive right away. You could almost see the wheels start to go around inside their heads. Veronica stared incredulously at her husband for a moment, then turned to me.

"Have you agreed, Mr. Nelson?"

Troy interrupted, answering for me. "Mr. Nelson is keeping his fingers crossed, to use his phrase. I know your attitude toward George, darling. You don't understand it at all, so you don't believe it. I'm just hoping you two will co-operate, that's all. For Steve and Clare and myself, this experiment has interesting possibilities. And I think they'll also concur with me in this. Peter was the chief creator of George. If George can help to bring Peter's murderer to justice, it would be very fitting. I think we at least owe Peter a try at it."

Veronica had considerable influence over her husband except in matters where George was concerned. So despite her ill-concealed scorn, we ate our dessert hurriedly and trooped downstairs to the laboratory.

I'm no judge of laboratories. I know nothing about electronic machines or any kind of science. But the place was impressive to me. It was a huge room, white on all sides for better illumination. You got into it through a series of doors which were kept locked. Once inside you were sealed off from the world. It reminded me of being in an atom-bombproof military control center or something.

Steve Antal and Clare Mesger had sets of keys, of course, but Marcus Troy used his, and he led the way. When we were all inside the laboratory, it was suddenly very silent except for the muffled sound of our footsteps.

Against the farthest wall was the main machinery, big, high, metal-enclosed cases stacked side by side, like shelf units in a library. That was part of George, a machine as big as a good-sized telephone exchange. The rest of George—the part Marcus Troy was so fond of—was in front of all that other stuff.

This was the part, I'd already been told, that contained the delicate mechanism that was the heart of the whole gadget. Only Marcus Troy, with his amateur outlook, would have thought it up this way. Maybe it wasn't completely scientific, but it was certainly theatrical.

George was a mechanical man, a robot, a life-sized, human-shaped hunk of stainless steel.

I'd seen the thing several times, but it still fascinated me. It stood there perfectly balanced on its two legs, with the feet just a trifle large and weighted. It was hinged in the important places where a human body was hinged. It could walk rather stiffly—I'd seen it. It could move its head, blink its eyes. Its arms were capable of all sorts of human-like gestures. The most amazing contraption I'd ever seen, almost as interesting and distracting as Veronica Troy.

"To begin with, let's all sit down," Marcus said.

There were comfortable, leather straight-backed chairs around a conference table, and we pulled these out and made a sort of circle with them. Automatically we included George as a part of the circle. Marcus sat down, and invited us all to join him. George apparently wasn't able to sit, or I'm sure Marcus Troy would have pulled up a chair for him.

"All right, here we are," our host said. "Now first I think a little briefing is in order, about what George can and cannot do. Veronica has heard me talk about George hundreds of times, but I doubt if she ever listened. And it's important for you, Mr. Nelson, because you'll have to ask George the proper questions."

"I know it's supposed to be a thinking machine. Isn't that right?"

Troy smiled. "Not quite. Close to it, we hope, but not quite. To think is to create really, and George can't do that. It can only respond and act upon certain facts that are fed into it. There's one important thing I've never explained to you, Mr. Nelson. I've never really told you what George was built to do."

I glanced at Veronica. She looked bored. "Okay, tell me," I said.

"There are plenty of electronic computers these days. They work on mathematical problems. We've built a computer that tries to work on much more subtle, complex problems. That's why I think George might help on this problem of murder. George was built to work on problems of morality."

Well, I hadn't heard that one for sure. And I nearly dropped my teeth there on that sound-proofed floor.

"You see, Mr. Nelson, as far as I'm concerned the principal problems facing mankind are not the mathematical ones. Yes, we need to know the answers to such questions as: 'How many pounds of thrust are needed to convey X pounds of weight from the earth to Mars?' But think of the many more important questions we need answers to. Forgive me if they sound like high school debate subjects. 'What should we do about segregation?' 'What are the ethics of public power versus private power?' 'Should we have capital

punishment?' 'How can we cure juvenile delinquency?' 'How can world peace be achieved on a basis of justice?' "

"Ye gods!" I said.

"An apt expression," Troy answered. "Problems that would vex even the gods, eh? But you do see that these problems, and many more like them, are the ones that need solving most urgently."

Marcus Troy, I decided, was a greater man, or a nuttier one, than I had suspected. "Oh sure," I agreed. "But how can a machine solve problems like that?"

He spread his hands and smiled. "George needed more sophisticated electronic insides than previous computers, of course. But as I said, all any machine can do is act upon the information that is fed into it. Therefore to solve moral problems, the machine has to be given the general principles of morality plus the facts that apply to the individual problem. Do you follow me, Mr. Nelson?"

"I don't know," I told him. "I hope so. Maybe . . ."

"Well, let me tell you what has already been fed into George as part of his permanent knowledge. He knows, for instance, as well as you and I do, that murder is immoral. Because George has been fed and has digested the Old and New Testaments, the Talmud, the Koran, the writings of Buddha, Socrates, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the Protestant Divines, as well as some of the choicer excerpts from such men as Shakespeare, Sophocles, Goethe, and Abraham Lincoln."

"That's quite a diet," I said admiringly. "So okay, so George knows that whoever killed Peter Banning committed a crime. But we don't need a machine to tell us that. We want to know *who* killed Banning."

Troy kept smiling. He was tremendously excited, and he was obviously trying very hard to be patient with me. "The machine will approach the problem differently from you, Mr. Nelson. Your approach was to look for physical facts. Now from those mere physical facts, how much do you actually know?"

I shrugged. "It's no great secret," I said. "Peter Banning was killed down here in this lab about midnight two nights ago. Cause of death was a single blow on the head by a blunt instrument. We don't have the weapon. Banning's body was found next morning by your butler. It was lying on the floor here close to George. Doctor can't tell for sure whether the murder occurred right here, or whether it occurred elsewhere and the body was dragged here. Nobody here in this house has a pat alibi. Every person says he was asleep at midnight. Every person here has a set of keys to the lab, except Mrs. Troy, and she could have filched them from you, Mr. Troy. The worst

thing is that there doesn't seem to be a motive . . ."

Troy raised his hand dramatically and interrupted. "Ah, the motive! The indispensable factor that you haven't been able to discover, Mr. Nelson. That's what George will work on. We will give him the facts about the people here. George will weigh each of us for the good and evil in us. George will tell us then, I think, which one is capable of murder. He will analyze our relationships with the dead man, and tell us which had the best reason to murder him. You looked for physical facts, Mr. Nelson. George will look for the psychological facts."

I looked around at the circle of faces. Each one was intent. Even Veronica had forgotten her air of boredom. Her gaze was riveted on George.

"A couple of other handy facts about George," Troy went on. "You've heard of machines which will take voice dictation and transcribe it into typed words on paper. Well, George contains a gadget like that. We don't need to bother with punched cards. All we need to do is talk."

I nodded. That was all I could do at this point.

"Secondly, George can also function as a lie-detector. Not by checking your blood pressure or anything like that. But simply by measuring the sincerity in your tone of voice. Lying therefore will only score against you. And what this really adds up to, you see, Mr. Nelson, is this. It doesn't matter whether the person tells the truth or not. All he has to do is to speak some words, and George will be able to distinguish between truth and lies. It's all up to you then, Mr. Nelson. The trick will be for you to ask the right questions."

When Marcus Troy finished, it was Veronica who spoke first. "Darling," she said, "if this machine will do everything you say it will, it's marvellous. I had no idea you were so clever."

Troy smiled at his wife. "Thank you, my dear. It's good to be appreciated."

"I know you've talked to me about this thing incessantly," she told him. "But I guess you're right. I never listened. Darling, I'm terribly sorry. I apologize. I'm so sorry it took a murder to open my eyes."

Troy stopped smiling, and looked a little sad. "Yes, it took a murder," he repeated. "Too bad. We'll miss poor old Peter."

There was a temporary silence. I felt almost like suggesting to the two scientists that we leave Marcus Troy and his wife alone for a little while. It was Troy himself who finally broke the spell. "Shall we get going with the experiment, Mr. Nelson?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. But I wasn't sure at all.

Troy rose and crossed the room to a panel of switches on the wall.

He flicked several of them. Small noises accompanied these maneuverings, which then finally settled down to an almost imperceptible hum. Then one last switch was thrown, and the robot came to life.

I hadn't seen this before, and it startled me. Lights came on behind both of George's eyes, and a faint ticking began inside his torso. There were some spasmodic movements in the metal arms, and the legs shuffled a few half steps back and forth. George sort of resembled a human being warming up to go into action.

"All ready," Troy called out as he came back and took his chair.

And there I was. The mechanical brain was ready to function. The suspects were all gathered. All I had to do was ask the correct questions. That's all!

"You have the floor, Mr. Nelson," Troy prodded gently.

I cleared my throat. What were some of the questions I'd asked when I first interrogated these people? Questions which led nowhere then, but which might give George something to work on.

"Well," I started out hesitantly, "one of the first things that struck me when I arrived on this case was the possibility of professional jealousy among all you scientists."

"Good!" Troy interjected approvingly. "I'm sure George understands the idea of professional jealousy."

Automatically, without thinking, I glanced toward George for corroboration. The robot stared back at me unblinkingly. But I guess he understood.

"You first, Mr. Troy," I said. "What was your opinion of Peter Banning as a scientist?"

"He was a genius," Troy answered without hesitation. "I never regretted hiring him. He was the most important man in our project."

I'd been watching Troy carefully. "You sounded sincere to me," I told him now. "But how do I find out what George thinks of your sincerity?"

Troy pointed to one of the big metal cases. "There's a machine in there like a teletype," he explained. "George's reactions to my answer have been recorded in there. You can read it all later. It's always better to give George the whole problem and then get the complete answer."

"Good," I said, without knowing whether it was good or not.

I turned to Clare Mesger. "Miss Mesger, what did you think of Peter Banning as a scientist?"

The woman's expressionless face came just slightly to life. "A superb genius," she said flatly. "It was a loss to the whole world when he was killed. If he had lived he would have been greater than Thomas Edison."

Well, maybe George had swallowed that, but it was a little strong for me. I've investigated enough

murders to have grown a little cynical.

"You, Mr. Antal," I said to the frothy-haired lad. "Do you think Peter Banning was a good scientist?"

"Sure, good."

I detected a little sound of sour grapes dripping, I thought. So I pursued the matter. "Mr. Troy gives Banning the greatest share of credit for George. Do you think Banning deserves the most credit for this project?"

A little hesitation? "Banning was very creative . . ."

Then a strange thing happened. The robot interrupted. I heard the clanking, only it wasn't clanking, because it was too well oiled to clank. Maybe a kind of soft grinding of gears or something. But the sound made me look at the robot.

And I got a quick impression. It was impossible, of course. But I got an instant impression from glancing at the robot that George didn't believe what Antal had just said. His legs moved certainly. I won't say he stamped, but you might call it that. His arms went through a series of agitated gestures that reminded me of an agitated deaf-mute trying to talk to someone who doesn't understand sign language. His eyes blinked rapidly and the head seemed to shake a little. Of course there was no expression on the metal face, but I sure thought there was for a second.

It was maybe half a minute before George's gyrations subsided. "What goes on here now?" I asked Troy. "Is there a short circuit or something?"

My host smiled, obviously enjoying my amazement. "I didn't mention this aspect of George, did I, Mr. Nelson? Well, the whole idea of the robot and trying to make him as human as possible was my contribution. You see, I thought that since George was working on human equations, he ought to have a human form. The robot is connected by short-wave radio to all those banks of computers. So the robot sort of reflects in kind of human fashion sometimes what the computers are deciding. Oh, I'll admit it's not the most important part of George. It's really just kind of a toy. Clare and Steve weren't interested in the robot, but Peter was. He liked the idea. He promised me that later we might even refine the robot down to the point where he'd have a voice and could actually speak the computers' results."

I was getting confused by this time. George was becoming a more complicated contraption all the time. I tried hard to concentrate on my own problem. I was looking for a murderer.

"I take it then," I said to Troy, "that George's reactions to what Antal said were negative. Antal was professionally jealous of Banning."

Troy nodded. "That's right. But you can't make a final judgment on just the robot's reaction. Remember the robot is just a toy, not a scientifically accurate measuring device as the whole machine is. Yes, we know now that Steve was jealous of Peter. But we don't know whether the jealousy was actually strong enough to motivate murder."

My brain was whirling. I was still asking myself whether all this was going to discover any truth, or whether I was just a fool in a funny little charade.

I turned back to Steve Antal. The man looked a little pale. Whether I believed in George or not, Antal apparently did. And the machine had found him out.

"Mr. Antal," I asked with new hope, "did Peter Banning ever treat you unjustly in any way? Did he ever act proud, or lord it over you because he thought he was the most important man on the project?"

Antal looked at the robot and not at me. "Banning always treated me as an equal," he said. And I for one believed he was telling the truth that time.

I was grasping at straws now, but the possibilities of this gimmick had just begun to dawn on me. Antal's actions were the key. It didn't matter what I thought of George. But if all my suspects implicitly believed that George could judge them, could see inside them and separate truth from lies and good from evil, they just might be inclined to tell the truth for the first time. I had a psychological club over them.

Everybody maybe but Veronica. She wasn't one of the scientific group. While the other four residents of the house had batted their brains out down in this laboratory, Veronica had spent her time sunning by the side of the pool. Maybe she didn't have the same faith in George that the others did.

"Mrs. Troy!" I said.

She turned toward me, and the first thing I saw was that she wasn't frightened like Antal was. "What is it, Mr. Nelson?" she asked. "Did I feel any professional jealousy toward Peter? The answer is no."

I had to smile. And I felt better. I was suddenly able to relax a little. I took my time about it now, trying to formulate the question just right. Meanwhile, my eyes found time to appreciate her. She was alert. Her green eyes sparkled. She wasn't just a beautiful but dumb blonde.

"Mrs. Troy," I said, "what, if anything, did you feel toward Peter Banning?"

She hesitated, as I knew she would. She wanted to phrase her answer correctly too. And I couldn't help wondering. Every beautiful woman is something of an actress. She spends her whole life on a stage, being looked at. With all her accumulated skill at make-

believe then, would this baby try to fool George? Just for the hell of it maybe?

"I might say, Mr. Nelson, that I was rather grateful for Peter. Of the three strangers my husband brought to live in my house, Peter was the only civilized, sociable one. Oh, he worked as much as the others, I imagine, but at meals he could talk about something besides his work . . ."

I hadn't communicated completely, or else she was trying to play dumb. "What I want to know," I interrupted, "is whether or not you found Banning attractive."

She smiled wistfully. "He was good-looking, intelligent, kind. What woman wouldn't be somewhat attracted toward him?"

"Miss Mesger," I asked, shifting targets, "was Banning attractive to you?"

Once before I had asked her approximately the same question, and she had given me a flat negative. But now I could see she was aware of George listening. "I loved him," she said.

Now we were getting somewhere. Even if George didn't turn out to be a good detective, he was certainly helpful for the third degree. I'd have never gotten this far by looking for the subtle inflections in Clare Mesger's monotonous voice or hoping to glimpse an expression in her pale expressionless face.

"Did Banning love you?" I asked her.

"I'm afraid not. He had his mind on . . ." She hesitated.

"On what?" I prodded her.

"He was too interested in Mrs. Troy."

I looked at Marcus Troy then. He surprised me by not seeming too surprised. "Did you know that?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "How could I help it? What man alive—except maybe Antal there—could have lived in the same house with my wife and not be somewhat attracted to her? It's perfectly natural, inevitable."

"Maybe so," I said. "But I think we're getting at something. There's a nice little web here. Miss Mesger liked Banning. Banning liked Mrs. Troy. You, I presume, liked Mrs. Troy. What I still want to find out is who Mrs. Troy liked."

We all looked toward Veronica, and I guess George did too. She was perfectly composed under our stares. Terrific poise. She directed her careful answer to her husband. "I've already admitted Peter was darned attractive. Fortunately, he didn't have much spare time . . ."

"What do you mean . . . fortunately?" I asked.

"I mean it was lucky he didn't have too much time, because he used some of his spare time in trying to make love to me . . ."

I was watching Marcus Troy for his reaction, but the biggest reac-

tion by far came from George. There was that soft sound of meshing gears again, and George started moving. His motions this time were even bigger than when Antal had lied. He stomped around and his arms waved so violently that I instinctively ducked. His eyes blinked with machine-gun rapidity, and there it was again, that almost human expression on that metal face.

"What's he disturbed about now?" I yelled at Troy.

Troy was watching the robot joyfully. He didn't answer till it had calmed down. "George is reacting beautifully," he said. "Remember, I told you it's been fed the best moral principles available. Now it's been told that another man was trying to make love to my wife. This is its response to attempted adultery. George disapproves very strongly."

I took just a moment to reflect that Marcus Troy was apparently more elated with the successful performance of his machine than he was disturbed by details of the dead man's treachery.

"Mrs. Troy," I said, getting back to my questioning, "how did you respond to Banning's love-making?"

"I put him off," she said. "I didn't want to insult him, because I knew he was terribly important to the work here. I suppose I lied to him, though I was a little confused too. I told him to wait till the work was finished. Maybe he would forget me after a while, though he said he wouldn't. He said he wanted to stay and keep working on the project, and I told him then that I certainly wasn't going to let him make love to me while he was working for my husband and living under my husband's roof. And I didn't tell my husband either, because I didn't want to upset his relationship with the best man he had."

"You considered your husband's work important then?"

"Well, I didn't understand it and I wasn't interested in it myself, but I knew how important it was to him."

"So we might say you stalled Banning?"

"That's right."

"But you said you were confused about Banning. This is the question you refuse to come right out and answer, Mrs. Troy. Were you in love with him? Or did you think you might possibly be in love with him?"

She looked away from me and at the robot. As if she at least half believed in George. And was half afraid of the machine.

"Marcus has neglected me for several years now," she answered softly, "ever since he started working on this project. And Peter Banning was very handsome, very attractive. But I also felt terribly grateful toward my husband. And I hoped too that maybe some day,

when he finished the project, he'd be more of a husband to me once again."

George never quivered, never moved a spring or gear. So maybe Veronica was telling the truth. Marcus Troy glanced at her now. He looked relieved, I thought, as if her relationship with Banning hadn't been as bad as he'd imagined and feared.

"Well, here we are," I said to all of them. "Antal was jealous of Banning as a scientist. Miss Mesger was jealous because Banning was interested in Mrs. Troy. Mr. Troy was jealous for the same reason. It seems we have a possible motive for everybody except Mrs. Troy."

"Good!" Troy said. "I'm glad we can rule my wife out of this. Mr. Nelson, do you think we've gone far enough to ask George for an opinion now?"

I pondered that. "If George can make anything out of this, he's a better man than I am," I said. "And I'm not ready to admit yet that George is a better man. Besides, something has just occurred to me . . ."

And it had. I got up and left the little circle of chairs. I could think better on my feet. I paced, and my footsteps were the only sound in the big room.

"There's still something missing here," I told them finally. "This machine, going on principles of good and evil, is supposed to solve human psychological equations. Right? But the equation isn't complete. Peter Banning should be part of it. A motive, you see, isn't just something belonging to one person. It's a link—a very strong link—between the murderer and his victim. Now the victim, the other half of the equation, hasn't been heard from."

I'd been watching Veronica, maybe from habit, and I saw those shapely tanned shoulders quiver. "Peter's dead," she argued. "He can't talk so the machine can decide whether he's lying or whether he's sincere."

I rejoined the circle, but I didn't sit. "Why don't I speak for him?" I suggested.

There was a silence, while they all looked at one another. I didn't try to interpret their glances. I had this other thing on my mind. But nobody objected vocally. I turned to George.

"George," I said, "my name's Peter Banning, and here's the status quo on me. I've worked for Marcus Troy for a couple of years. So he's my employer and my host, see? One of my co-workers is Steve Antal. He's kind of jealous of me. But I have nothing against him, and I wouldn't try to hurt him. Not deliberately anyway. Another co-worker is Clare Mesger. She loves me. But she's never told me. I hurt her, yes, but without knowing it. Marcus Troy? I admire him, and I'm grateful to him for the opportunity to work on this very

interesting project with him . . ."

Up to this point, George had listened, I suppose, but quietly, with no visible reaction. The reaction, the familiar one, came when I continued. "I can't help it, but I'm in love with Veronica, Marcus Troy's wife . . ."

There was that ominous mechanical noise from the robot, the eye-blinking, the shuffling of the feet, and the waving of the arms. I felt like I was goading the thing.

"I've got a good reason for loving Veronica," I said. "She's beautiful. I'd hardly be human if I weren't in love with her."

George apparently didn't believe that Veronica's beauty was a sufficient excuse. His reaction continued, fell into a sort of rhythm. Like an elephant's rhythm when the animal stands weaving his whole body from side to side, swinging his trunk slightly farther out than the rest of his body. I'd always felt nervous watching elephants doing that. I'd always thought they were getting nervous. I'd always been conscious of the great reserve of power behind that apparently aimless rhythm. And I'd always felt slightly afraid.

I was slightly afraid of George now.

"So this is my problem, George," I went on a bit uncertainly. "Antal hates me, but I've done nothing to goad him at this particular time. Clare Mesger loves me, but she's been suffering in silence for a long time now. I really haven't done anything *to* either of them. Now I've done something to Mr. Troy, been ungrateful to him, but this has been only indirect action. The person I'm doing something *to* at this moment is Veronica Troy . . ."

Everybody was listening closely. I knew that without looking at them. And George was listening too. His excitement was growing, his restless movements gradually becoming more violent.

I was trying to put myself in Banning's shoes where Veronica was concerned. It wasn't too hard a role to act.

"I love Veronica. She's tried to stall me off, but I still love her. Every day I stay in this house I love her more. I like Marcus Troy, but I'm jealous of him too. He's got Veronica because he's rich. But he's too old for her. I'm more her age. I'm a brilliant scientist. I could make a living for her. I want her. I want to take her in my arms. I want to make love to her. But she won't let me. She keeps telling me I can't live hypocritically under her husband's roof and keep on working for him, and at the same time make love to his wife . . ."

George was really hot and bothered now. His arms were swinging full from the shoulder, with all the menace that the old elephant's trunk used to have for me. He was going to blow a fuse any minute. Well, I wanted to blow it. And then maybe we'd have Banning's killer.

"Veronica has a strange sense of right and wrong, George. That's what she keeps talking about. My ingratitude. My trying to make love to Troy's wife while I'm Troy's employee, Troy's house guest. What can I do, George? What should I do? I'm really a hypocrite as long as I go on like this. There's only one solution as I see it. I'm going to ask Veronica to run away with me . . ."

Well, that did it all right. But George didn't blow any fuse. Instead he blew his stack. His two arms ceased their sideways motion, and one of them—the right, I think—raised straight up in the air. And he came at me.

I'm glad I always wear my revolver in my shoulder holster. I managed to tug it out as I stumbled back. I pumped six slugs into that robot. So the big metal arm never did come down. George staggered back, just as a man would, and fell down with an echoing crash. And lay there . . .

"You all saw it with your own eyes," I told them upstairs later. "That's what I believe happened. Peter Banning was the machine's chief creator. He believed it could make moral judgments. So he put it to a practical test. He probably said just about the same thing I said. And I guess George thought that wife-stealing was just about the worst crime there is."

Marcus Troy was happy and sad at the same time. "But you did it the hard way, Mr. Nelson," he mourned. "The robot is a complete wreck. If Peter were alive, he and I together could rebuild it. But I can never do it alone."

Veronica was pensive. "I still don't believe it," she told me.

I could understand. Only the people who built George believed. Veronica's point of view was, in fact, shared by both the Captain and the Commissioner when I tried to explain it to them.

They sent me back finally to the Troy estate, and I stayed there for a month. I couldn't find any blood on either of the robot's arms to indicate they'd delivered a blow. But then Banning's wound hadn't been a very bloody one. There were no fingerprints. Nothing. I couldn't reconstruct either the crime or the criminal—conclusively.

I couldn't then, and I can't now. But I can't prove that Peter Banning *wasn't* murdered by a machine. Can you?

This introduces an individual capable of inspiring confidence in anyone. For here is a confidence man who merely has to get himself looking like a homo sapiens to be able to go anyplace and do just about anything and anybody.

I WAKE up at a quarter-to-one P.M. in the afternoon on the second floor of a third-rate hotel with a fourth-degree hangover. I know it is quarter-to-one because the maid is yelling the room is up at one sharp. I know my whereabouts because I recognize them from other evil awakenings in New York, the Wonder City. The hangover takes no figuring out. Not to mince hairs, I am fed up with the whole deal.

I decide I need a change of scene. Miami is out because of lack of funds. Even Weehawken is out, for the same reason. Unless you want to count a single and two Indian head nickels, I am tapped out.

I do not need a change of scene like going to the track or a gin-mill, because this would be no change. I need to get entirely out of this creep milieu and associate with the creme. I mean the creme creme. And the only way to do this is to walk into one of the best hotels in town and front my way in. The hotel bit is new, but not the fast-talk routine, so I am confident I can score once I get myself looking like a homo sapiens again. In fact, the more I think about it the more I am sure this the best idea I obtain since I determine to give up lentils for Lent.

The first thing is to check on the

by Joe Mackey

haberdashery. I remove a glass of water balanced on the doorknob of the closet (a precaution designed to thwart nighttime intruders bent on a little larceny); inside, the suit, shirt and tie are hanging neatly on hangers. The socks are hanging over the window-sill, secured by the frame, which insures their being fresh and clean. The shoes are under the bed, and a bit of brisk rubbing with the coverlet gives them a classy shine.

The safety-razor is under my pillow. I sharpen the blade on the inside of a glass filled with warm water, and removal of my stubble gives me a real psychological lift as long as I do not look too closely. A quick shower down the hall, into my finery, and I am ready to hit the best hotel in town. Well, almost ready.

I know Little Sam has a very fine suitcase, which I will need. It is an expensive job because it was acquired under suspicious circumstances, and it is almost new because it has spent most of its natural life in the pawnbroker's, Sam having had a tough time since he has been going straight. I have a key to Sam's room, because he knows I never borrow anything unless it is an emergency.

I make the three blocks to Sam's, grab the bag and leave without taking another thing. Sam's taste in clothes is deplorable and, anyway, he is a little guy; only thing of his that fits me are his neckties. I make a fast tour of the pads of half a

dozen friends, getting here a shirt, here a pair of shorts—mostly stuff I leave there at one time or another—and soon I have enough so the suitcase feels like it contains something, without the phony heft of telephone books.

With the big buck-ten I am carrying I cannot make a cab, and I am not in a subway mood. I duck across Columbus Avenue fast because I do not want to run into any pals right now, and I head for Central Park West. I decide to walk because it is a nice day and, who knows, some chick in one of the fancy apartment houses may sense my sterling qualities and invite me in. This does not happen, but my spirits are not dampened because I am looking forward to my joust of wits with the vested interests. I cross Columbus Circle and head for what we will call the Berkeley Towers Hotel because that is not its name. (I am no fink).

I walk up to the entrance springily, looking at the doorman—who is uniformed like a Bulgarian general—as if to imply that this walking sure beats riding in one's chauffeured limousine. I give him a democratic nod and bound up the carpeted stairs to the lobby. I let a bellboy take the keister and I head for the desk clerk. As he looks up, I give it the old well-well-well opening.

"Hel-lo!" I cry, letting a smile light up my face. "Been a long time, hasn't it?"

The guy obviously thinks it has been forever, but he is too muddled to know for sure.

"How have you been?" I say.

"Oh, fine, sir," he says, and I know I have got it made.

I let amused reproach creep into my voice. "Don't tell me you have forgotten me? Mr. Collins?"

"Oh, of course not, Mr. Collins," he stammers.

"It is good to see you again," I say. Then I become businesslike. "You have my reservation, of course."

"Reservation?" I think he is going to cry. "I'm afraid not. We haven't a room in the house."

I am aghast. "Why, I have my secretary call up four days ago."

"We were full up then, too, Mr. Collins. She must have forgotten to tell you."

I shake my head, then shrug, rising above all this. "That girl. Well, this is a bother, isn't it? Are you sure there is nothing? I will take even a small suite. Until there is a suitable vacancy."

He sighs. "Not even a small suite."

"Do you suppose there is something at the Waldorf-Towers?"

"That is not one of our hotels, Mr. Collins. Wait!" His eyes sparkle. "I think I can get you into the Barbizon-Belmont. I know I can." He writes on a card, seals it in an envelope and hands it to me. "Just give this to a clerk there named Jerman. He owes me a fa-

vor. He'll see that you're taken care of. We can't neglect our old customers, can we?"

"This is very decent of you," I say, giving him the stout-fella expression. "And you can be expecting a handsome package one of these days."

The guy's smile reaches up to his ears and, with a cheery wave, I take the suitcase from the bellboy and stride out front, signaling the doorman to get me a cab.

"Barbizon-Belmont," I tell the hackie abstractedly; plainly, I am too occupied to think of a tip for the doorman and, for all he knows, I may be the president of the joint, which is even plushier than the Berkeley Towers.

The fare is eighty-five cents. I cannot cheapen myself with a two-bit tip, so I just give the cabbie the buck with such a preoccupied air that it might be a deuce. He buys the gag and does not make a peep.

In the lobby I hand my envelope to the desk clerk.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Collins. Mr. Seavers called to say you were coming." His brow wrinkles in concern. "Unfortunately, we're pretty full, too. Would something at $17 a day be adequate for the present?"

My brows go up, then I struggle to adjust graciously to the inferior accommodations. "I suppose it will have to do."

"Thank you, sir."

I favor him with a nod and follow a bellboy toward the elevators across a rug with a nine-inch pile. I am rubbing the two Indian head nickels together in my pocket. I stop at the newsstand and buy a New York Times and as we ascend in the elevator I am absorbed in the Stock Market quotations.

My room turns out to have a rug with only a four-inch pile, but it is big enough to hold the last four rooms I have flopped in. The bellboy performs the usual vital functions, such as turning on the water faucet and dislocating the Venetian blinds, then he says brightly: "Would you like me to unpack your bag, sir?"

Aware that the contents will bring not less than eighty-five cents from a very soft-hearted ragpicker, I decline.

I know better than to try to con him about why he is getting no tip. You give a bellboy a solid gold ingot and he has it tested at the Assay Office. So I just slip him a confidential wink and say: "See you tomorrow on your tip. Right now I have to nurse this hangover."

"Yes, sir! he says. "Can I get you something for it?"

I give this a decent amount of consideration. "Ohh, maybe a large tomato juice with lemon and a dash of Worchestershire . . . A bite to eat might help. Steak, rare. Tossed green salad."

"Right, sir. I'll tell Room Service."

As he starts out on this mission of mercy I add casually. "You

might have a Scotch sent up, too, son. Double."

Waiting for these rich viands, I loll on the super de luxe mattress on my outsize bed and case the luxurious surroundings. The picture alone would fetch a pile in any hockshop. The table lamp, though too bulky to be carried out under a coat, is not riveted to the table, as is the case in some joints I have patronized. But enough of such fancies. I must learn to think Big.

My chow arrives on a serving-cart slightly smaller than a Jag, and the steak is under a silver dome that, melted down, would take me to Hialeah. The food, drink and waiter's tip are put on my bill.

When the waiter exits, I belt down the Scotch. He has not reached the elevator before I call Room Service, tell them I dropped the Scotch and order another.

I make my happy way through a half-acre of succulent steak and accessories, get my second Scotch, and lie back in Got-It-Madeville. Soon, though, a funny thing happens. Well-fed and not wishing to get stoned all by myself, I find I am lonely. Poor little rich boy. I cannot just go knocking on doors like in some of my former domiciles and, somehow, I am not yet in the mood to hit the hotel bar. What I need is a couple of buddies to share my gold-mine and applaud my coup.

I do not trust switchboard operators, from experience. All such a babe needs is to hear the type of bars I plan to call, and get a load of my buddies' language, and there is a serious flaw in the facade I am building up. So I decide to lam uptown and hit half a dozen spots.

The trip turns out to be a nothing. In the Columbus Avenue gin-mills I try, there is either nobody I know, or those I do know are too stiff to get in the subway, much less the Barbizon-Belmont. I mooch a few drinks—thinking of the irony of it all—and after leaving my new address carefully with a few selected (and incredulous) bartenders, to be given to a few choice friends, I head back for my ivory tower.

I am sipping my third Room Service Scotch in my $17-a-day room, and looking broodingly over the skyline, when the phone rings. I pick it up and a voice says, very gentlemanly, "Mr. Collins?"

Despite the masquerade, I recognize the guttural rasp of Bad-Eye Moran.

"Yays," I say, matching him in gentility.

"This is Mr. Moran, Judge Moran's son," he says, and I realize he figures the phone may be tapped. "I receive your communication and I am prepared to come down and discuss them foreclosures."

"Splendid. I am in room 640."

"Splendid," he says. "Colonel Rainsford-Jones is willing to accompany me."

By this I know he means Gong-

Gong Jones, who is a little punchy but who acts all right unless he hears a loud bell.

"By all means," I say.

Bad-Eye clears his throat delicately. "Shall we bring our wives along, in the event that we wish to have dinner after we clear up business matters?"

Knowing that Bad-Eye's wife is still in Vegas and that Gong-Gong has buried two of his, I say: "Why not drop the ladies off at the Colony and we will call them later?"

"Splendid."

The Colony is not the swank spot of the same name in the East Sixties, but the nickname we have for a dive near Scratch Park, because it is so different.

With my friends on the way, I am already feeling better. I feel better still after a shower and shave, and by the time they arrive I have ordered roast beef sandwiches and a quart of Scotch. I figure champagne will be too ostentatious.

"Mr. Collins," Bad-Eye says politely as I open the door. Gong-Gong bows formally and extends his hand.

As I close the door behind them, they huddle up to me and Bad-Eye whispers hoarsely, looking around: "Can we talk?"

"Sure, the joint's empty."

"What's the deal, what's the deal?" Gong-Gong looks at me, bug-eyed.

"Class, kid," I say. "I walk in. I take over."

"What'd ya hit the double?" Bad-Eye says.

"I don't even have a show horse for months. No, you are just seeing a big operator operate big."

"I see you operate before," Bad-Eye says, "and the innocent bystander gets the rabbit-punch. What is the pitch?"

I fill them in on the whole deal. When I finish, Gong-Gong clouts himself in the head in delight and starts shadow-boxing. But Bad-Eye looks worried.

"And how, pray tell," he says, "are you going to pay the tab?"

"We will cross the bridge when we come to it," I say.

"You will cross it when *you* come to it. I am crossing out right now."

Gong-Gong stops punching and looks from one to the other of us.

"Bad-Eye," I say, hurt, "do I ever in all my life let you down?"

"Yeah," he says.

"I will let that pass. But be realistic. You are not in any danger. You guys are just my guests."

"They might get me for consorting with known criminals," Bad-Eye cracks, but I see him scanning the sandwiches and Scotch and know he is all right. Gong-Gong starts grinning and swinging again.

"Before we go to work on the goodies," Bad-Eye says, "what is the plan?"

"No plan. There is nothing crooked in this, any way you look at it. We are just here on a pleasure jaunt." After a pause I add: "Of

course, there is a slight profit motive, too—which I am dealing you in on free gratis. I think I can order theater tickets on the arm."

"Who wants to go to the theayter?" says Gong-Gong.

"Lots of characters. And they will pay to do so."

"Aha!" says Bad-Eye.

"I get it," Gong-Gong says. "Grab a mittful."

"You never know when to quit," I tell him. "That is why you have bells in your skull. I will try for four. But first I will insure my play. Listen." I pick up the phone, ask for the manager's office, get a dame and identify myself.

After a short wait I get an assistant manager. "I am expecting a party tonight about eleven-thirty, including Congressman Koenig and Princess Bakavarja," I lay it on, "but I find now I must take some people to the theater and probably will not be back till midnight. Can you have someone on hand to greet them and show them to a table?" The guy profusely assures me that the desk men will be alerted. "Capital," I say. "Now can you arrange to get me four good seats for a current hit?" The guy says he will have it seen to at once and call me back.

I tell the boys, take a small bow and ask: "And now, have you got any cabbage?"

"At the moment," Bad-Eye says, "I cannot afford a cot in the elevatorshaft of this dump. Ask Gong-Gong if he has any folding money."

"I am not rich in worldly goods," the little ex-pug says, "but anyone you want belted is dead!"

"I do not mean money toward paying the bill, dope," I explain. "Just a little moving-around money, like at the bar, where I would like to establish a beachhead. We need moola enough to buy at least one drink apiece there, in case I cannot sign a tab. If I can't, we pay and blow and my credit is still good. If the writing arm is good, we are in."

"The odds are very fair," says Bad-Eye. "I will put up a pound."

"I was saving this for ballet lessons," Gong-Gong says, "but I will match it."

As I take their dough, the phone rings and I smile at what comes out of the receiver.

"The tickets, gentlemen," I report, "are at the desk. It is now six in the P.M. We will hit the bar and, cuffo or not, cut out by seven so we have plenty time to peddle them. Meanwhile, in this bar we may meet some high-type people."

"I," Gong-Gong says dreamily, "once go with a broad had a diamond filling in her front tooth."

"A little briefing first boys," I say. "All the time we are in this hotel, we put on the perfect gentleman act."

"No throwin' people outta the window like that time in Chi, hah?" chortles Gong-Gong.

"Not only that," I explain sternly.

"No bad language, no boisterous behavior, you treat all broads like ladies even if they get nasty, and you do not clobber anyone."

"Without cause," says Bad-Eye, taking a slug out of the bottle.

"Even with cause."

Bad-Eye takes the neck of the quart out of his mouth. "Right. You hear that, Gong-Gong?"

"Whatta ya lookin' at me? Who breaks the bar mirror in Dink's last week? Who—"

"Gentlemen do not," Bad-Eye says, "dig up the unpleasant past."

As we head for the elevator, I look over my buddies and decide we make a not unwholesome group. Bad-Eye's black shirt and yellow tie are a little sporty for the surroundings, maybe, but he can easy be a rich cattleman or eccentric mining baron. Gong-Gong is a little tougher to pigeonhole, but he can pass for the moneyed crust if he does not talk too much; a lot of outdoor-type millionaires are a little punchy or have cauliflower ears from falling off of polo ponies and whatnot.

Going down, we ask the elevator boy how to find the bar and he says there are three. Eyes front, he tells us: "If you gentlemen want a few quiet drinks and wish to discuss business I would suggest the Oxford Room. It has a quiet, dignified atmosphere and is only for men."

For a second, I think Gong-Gong is going to belt him, and Bad-Eye makes a face like he has eaten an overripe oyster.

"No," I chuckle easily. "We finish discussing business. Now we like to relax."

"Well, there's the Maison Pompadour," says the kid. "There you can drink and have dinner."

"Are dames out there, too?" Gong-Gong puts in.

"Colonel, Colonel," I say, still chuckling, but silencing him with a dagger look. "You and your whimsical sense of humor."

"Yes, ladies are served," the kid says, stealing a peek at Gong-Gong, who has relapsed into demure quiet, "but, maybe, if you are looking for a livelier atmosphere, you should try the cocktail lounge."

"We thank him, I pick up my tickets at the desk and we head for the cocktail lounge. As we pass through the electric-eye entrance, I see Bad-Eye flinch; he remembers such gimmicks where an alarm goes off if you are carrying anything metal.

The joint is real elegant, but is decorated in what might be called Early Decorum. Good taste and all that jazz, to extremes. And although about twenty people occupy the bar and tables it is so quiet you can hear an arch drop.

"This is the lively spot," Bad-Eye mumbles. "Madame Tussaud's."

At the bar, three dead-pan bartenders in white jackets with small gold crests on their lapels are poised to attend the wants of the clientele.

We squat on three black leather bar-stools and one of the stick-men glides up, makes a large smile and leans over till his head almost touches mine.

"Ghentemen?" he says in a Charles Boyer accent.

We all order Scotch and start talking like big deals.

"I think I shall sell all those blue chip stocks I have short," I remark to Bad-Eye.

He catches on at once and cracks: "My debentures pay a minimum of four per cent. I will let you in on the ground floor."

Gong-Gong is looking from one to the other of us like he is at a tennis match. Then he gets the bit and says: "AT & T."

"Since it is a bearish market, I think I unload about forty grand," Bad-Eye puts in.

"This is approximately twenty million francs on the Bourse," I say, in case the frog bartender does not savvy American dollars.

By the time we finish our drink I figure we have made our point, so I say to the bartender: "I am in 640. I like to sign for this."

"Of course, zhir," he says, whipping out a pad, and my colleagues settle comfortably on their stools.

From here on in it is a sight to bring tears to the eyes of Carrie Nation. We are belting the Scotch with abandon and I am signing tabs till I get drinker's cramp.

Before long, though, we are getting bored because the customers are strictly from Nothingville. At the bar are two old guys, each alone, who look like they make their pile dispossessing widows and orphans; a couple all wrapped up in theirself, and a skinny guy with a monocle and a red vest. At the tables are some high types getting a snootful in a snooty manner. I have been in many buckets of blood, but this is the first time I am in a bucket of bluebloods and I am not too impressed.

I see my companions are getting edgy. Once, when the bartender serves us and I sign, Gong-Gong growls: "When does this guy spring?" I decide it is time we go peddle our tickets. This is confirmed when Bad-Eye calls to him: "Hey, buddy, are you gonna buy one or be one?"

I hustle them out and we taxi to West 47th, where our show is running. I give Bad-Eye two tickets and keep two and we take up positions on opposite sides of the marquee, not too near the lights. Gong-Gong stands across the street to warn us if he sees any plainclothes men coming along. Uniformed cops we can spot without assistance.

I am not there fifteen minutes and have accosted only four couples when a pair of squares from Squaresville take my tickets for $13.50 per. Ten minutes later, Bad-Eye ankles up and says: "Thirty."

We make a three-way split down the block, which gives us $19. apiece, with me also keeping the

ten Bad-Eye and Gong-Gong give me earlier, because the whole deal is my idea. Everybody is satisfied. I put twenty in my shoe, which gives me nine dollars to play with.

"Now, boys," I say, rubbing my hands, "what say we hit that old Belmont-Barbizon bar again?"

"Let us invite down a few friends, maybe even up to the room," says Bad-Eye. "Say, Red-headed Flo, Millie and Big Shiela?"

I do not wish to offend my friends, but I am afraid these ladies will never get past the lobby, even if they are not staggering.

"We are not on Seventy-second Street now," I explain gently. "Let us go back to the hotel and find some aristocrats."

"Silky," Bad-Eye says to me sheepishly, "with all due respect, that is a pretty nothing joint as far as people go."

I look at Gong-Gong.

"Don't get sore," he says, "but I would rather go see Big Shiela."

"No ambition," I mutter. "Okay. Goof the chance of a lifetime. I am going back and pick me up an heiress."

"Maybe we will be down later," Bad-Eye says contritely.

"Yeah, maybe. But get this. I am lamming out of there tomorrow morning, so I want you should set up my exit. Call up about seven and say you do not want to disturb me, but for the operator to remind me I have an appointment with the president of Consolidated at eight and *I am to bring the complete set of charts and blueprints.* This will let me get out with Little Sam's suitcase. You got it straight?"

Bad-Eye repeats the instructions. "You are in. But we still may be down later tonight."

I go back to the hotel bar and belt down a few more free ones. The joint has filled up some, but the characters are still pretty dull. The few good-looking dolls, all escorted, do not give me a tumble and I begin to think Bad-Eye and Gong-Gong are right. I think maybe I will trot up to Columbus Avenue for awhile, but first I must have a little shut-eye as I am feeling my booze. I never drink this fast when I am paying for it.

I find the room and flop without undressing, meaning to get up in an hour or so, but when I come to, the sun is shining. I grab the phone and ask the time, and she tells me eight-ten.

"Any messages for me?"

"No sir."

I get a hollow feeling, but I am not sore at Bad-Eye and Gong-Gong. Like me, they are heir to the weaknesses of the flesh. I take a fast shave and am sloshing cold water on my face and wondering how I am going to get out of the joint, when a knock comes at the door. I look out the window. Six stories. I run a comb through the hair and straighten the tie.

"Who is it?" I call out with empty cheeriness.

"Assistant Credit Manager."

I look out the window again, but there is no fire escape. I dredge a smile into my kisser and open the door. Standing there are a little guy in a dark suit who looks like a Madison Avenue executive and a big guy in a dark suit who looks like nothing except what he is.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

They step in without an invitation and the house dick closes the door.

"We neglected to have you fill out a credit card, sir," the little guy says, holding one out.

"Credit card?" I know I cannot muscle the two of them, so all I can do—pending a miracle or an inspiration—is stall. "This is absurd."

"You have run up quite a bill, sir," the runt says, still holding out the card.

"Are there any messages for me?" I ask. "Any telegrams?"

He just shakes his pointy head.

"Botheration. Money is supposed to be sent to me this morning."

"It hasn't been."

"Disgraceful. There shall be some dismissals as a result of this. Not," I add, smiling, "involving you. You are just performing your duties. I mean at my corporation."

I see they are unmoved so I try another straw. "Is there no word for me from Congressman Koenig or Princess Bakavarja?"

"We were unable, sir," says the card-bearer, "to locate any such Congressman in the Congressional Record or any such princess in the Almanac de Gotha. The credit card?"

Here are Waterloo and Armageddon, with a dash of the Raymond Street Jail.

I take the card, scrawl my name on it and hand it back.

"What is this?" the little guy says.

"Look, mister, I do not have a bank account. I do not have any references. So what is the use of filling that thing out?"

He sighs and makes a well-that's-it gesture, and the big guy seems to get bigger.

"But before you go yelling copper," I say, "may I ask you if the name Tony Belmont means anything to you?"

They swap knowing smiles. "Everyone," the runt tells me, "is well aware that Mr. Belmont is the son of the man who owns the hotel, but throwing his name around is a very old dodge."

"Yeah? Well are you well aware that I used to handle his action at the track? On occasion I give him credit for a G. You might return the courtesy."

"Perhaps," he smirks, "his credit-rating is better than yours."

At a nod from Runto, Fatso begins moving in. Inside the hotel, I realize, I am dead, but if I can get Fatso out in the street the odds on me go up.

"Wait a minute!" I hold up my

hand. "I commit no crime so far. I sign in under my own name. How do you know I cannot pay up?"

"Well, can you?"

"Yeah! I do not have a bank account, but I have a tin box." I pull out a bunch of keys. "If you do not believe me, pull me in. I sue the joint till the walls crack."

"Where is this tin box?"

I name a bank near Central Park, a good location to try a break.

Runto sighs again. "All right, Mitch, take him up in a cab. We might as well be stuck for cab-fare, too."

Now that I know I am getting out, I decide to risk a face-saving crack.

"I do not enjoy myself in your dump and I am not recommending it to my friends, even if they are flush. *Especially* if they are flush."

"C'mon," Fatso says, giving me a shove with his belly. "Get goin'."

We leave the hotel, me walking like it is the Last Mile, and grab a cab. Maybe at a red light, in heavy traffic, I can make a dash. But I see Fatso has his hand in a bulging pocket, so I sit back.

After a block or so, though I realize it is silly, I ask innocently: "Can I step out for a pack of butts?"

He does not even answer, just hands me a cigarette.

After another few blocks, I say: "This time I am serious. I must visit the gentleman's room. You don't have to go *there* with me."

"We are Siamese twins, buster," he says, but we pull up outside a bar. He is inches behind me all the way, fat hand still in heavy pocket, so I try nothing.

Back in the cab, I ask him: "Would you really shoot a fellow-man?"

"A fellow-man," he says, "in the leg. A bookie, after what they have done to me, anyplace."

Well, so much for the dash-for-life; one sucker play like that and I am prone right on my back. I realize we are coming into the homestretch and I am running slow.

"I have got a sporting proposition," I say. "Will you let me go to the track if I swear not only to pay the hotel bill, but take care of you? I have a sure winner today."

"Ho. Ho. Ho."

"All right, then. Suppose *we* go to the track?"

"Have you really got a tin box?"

"Here is my little tin box," I tell him, pulling the twenty out of my shoe.

"Queer dough?"

"I do not handle any queer bills in months," I retort, vexed at this aspersion on my twenty.

"Lemme see it." He takes the twenty, examines it and shoves it in his pocket. "It is a good twenty, but a bum proposition. Maybe *I* will go to the track, but you are going to the can. Driver, back to the hotel!"

I am aghast at this perfidy. "This

is malfeasance! You can't do it."

The driver is not turning the car around and Fatso asks him: "Did you see anything?"

"I dunno," the guy says. "Did I?"

Fatso hands out a fin. The hackie takes it and says: "My contact lenses was clouded over." He looks at me apologetically and shrugs. "There are rotten apples in every profession."

I bear no malice toward the cab-jockey. After all, I am not on his dope-sheet of buddies. He is just an innocent bystander, sort of, who is taking a drop of loot to keep his tongue buttoned.

But Fatso.

Fatso looks at me with a smug sneer. "A wise guy. A real wise guy."

I am fuming inside. Already I am not so worried about the can. So I will miss some drinks, broads and days at the track. I will come out dry, fit and set to make a killing. And, meanwhile, I got a pretty good story to tell—how Silky Collins cons his way into the classiest dump of them all.

The twenty bucks hurts more. Where I am going, I can use it. In there, I can promote. Anyway, I still have some dough in the other shoe.

What murders me is being taken by this big pork chop. *Me.*

"Well, Pops," I say, trying to keep my voice even. "I guess I am not so wise, after all. I got to hand it to you."

"You handed it to me, all right," he guffaws and, though I hope he will choke, I manage a chuckle. I can see he is getting into a good mood over what a bright guy he is.

"Look," I say, "you got the twenty. You can afford to do one little thing for me."

"What?" he says, scowling.

"I got a suitcase at the hotel belongs to a friend, Little Sam. Just see that he gets it. You can afford to be magnanimous. And I will not make a peep about the twenty."

"A lot of good it would do you," he says, but I see he would prefer it that way. "Well, yes, I guess I can do that much for you."

"Thanks, Mitch," I say. "You are a generous guy."

"Oh, well," Fatso says. "Give and take."

"I'll give you his name and address. Just tell him who you are and what happens to me."

"Yeah, I can do that."

I settle back. Now I am happy. Little Sam is going to get his suitcase back.

And, of course, there are a few side angles. Little Sam may find a way to get me bail. And/or he may trip Fatso a little on his way down the stairs.

Either way, I figure, I got a scheme working for me. Until I get a better idea.

—Continued from Back Cover

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